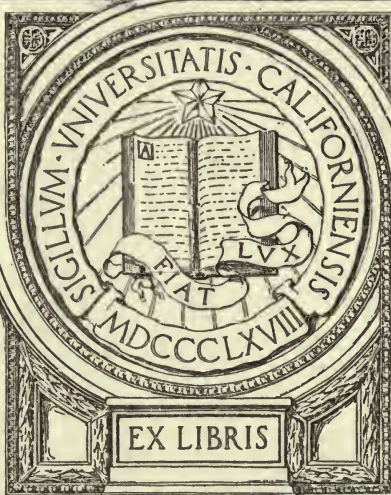


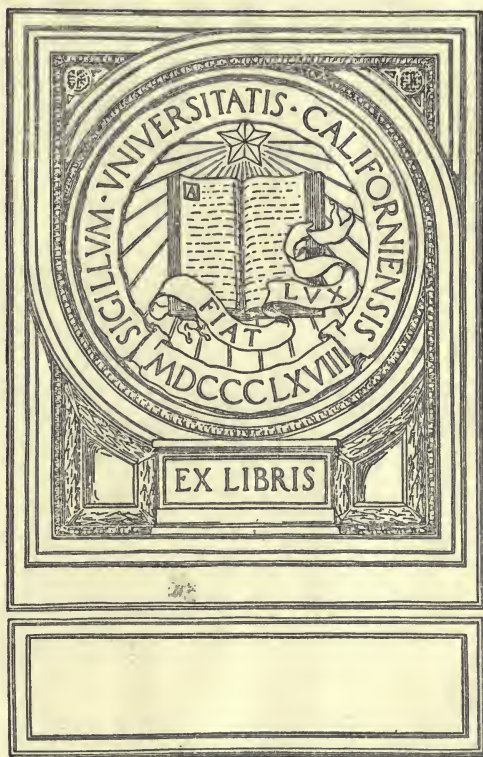
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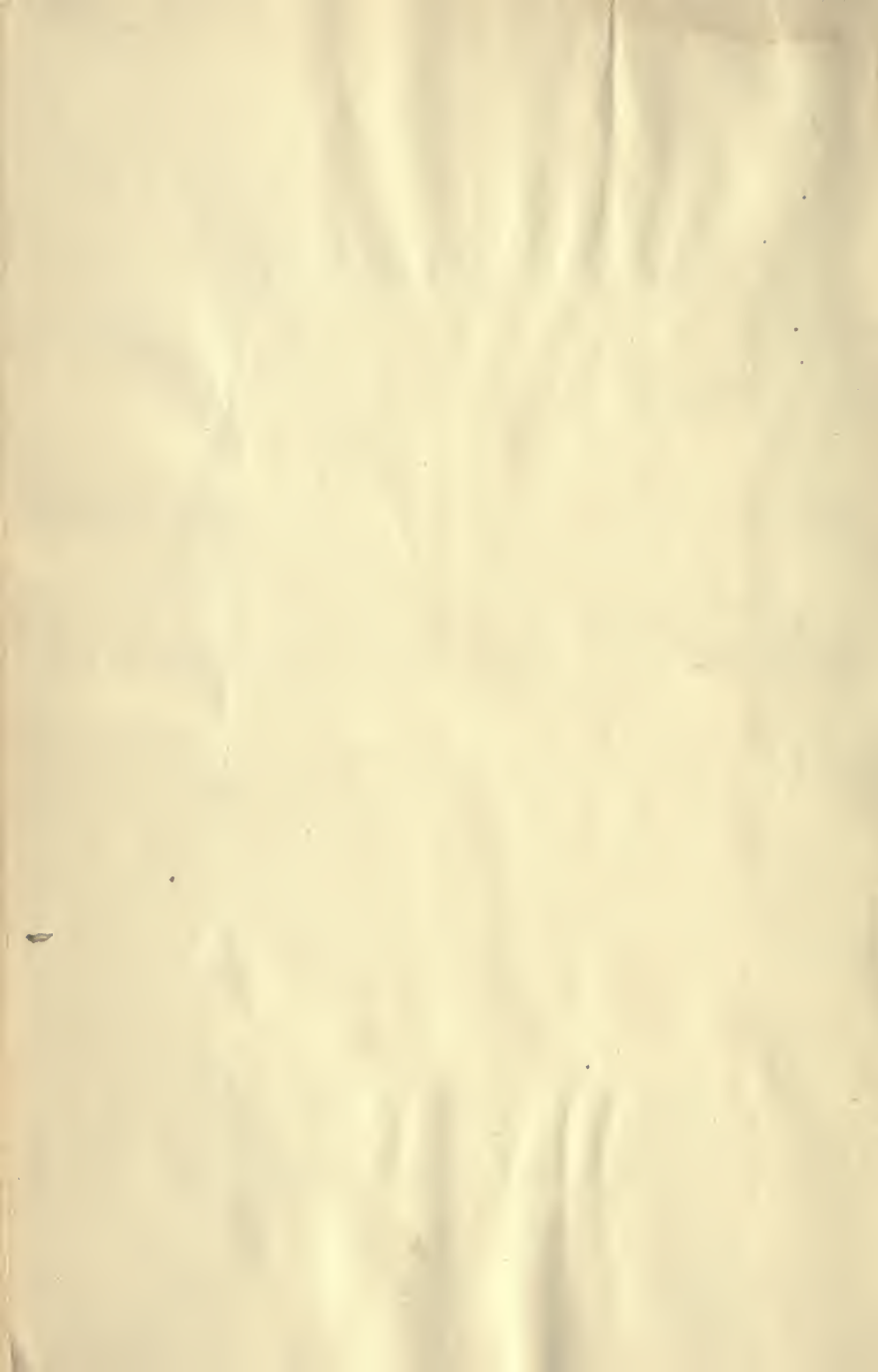
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Papers of The Shakespeare Society of New York  
No. 11

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A FURTHER STUDY  
OF  
THE OTHELLO

*Have we misunderstood Shakes-  
peare's Moor?*

BY

WELKER GIVEN, ESQ.

*A Member of the Shakespeare Society of New York*



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## PREFACE.

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It cannot be shown too often how Shakespeare cast out the grossness which abounded in the sources of many of his plots and which his age would have been glad to have had him enliven with his genius. Stemming popular taste and example, he strove for greater purity. The Bankside editors have called attention to such purification in "Hamlet" and the "Merchant of Venice." It has remained for an extended effort to be made in these pages to indicate in the case of Othello and Desdemona how [Shakespeare portrayed a super-refined sexual honor with a delicacy and purity far beyond even the semi-sacred miracle or mystery drama of his youth, from which in part he obtained the suggestion.]

Comparing the "Othello" with Cinthio's Italian tale, and bringing into consideration the strangely overlooked influence of the miracle play, a new view of Shakespearean purity and power must dawn upon us when we behold, as with the eyes of the Elizabethans, the last stage in the *mésalliance* of black and white portrayed in the redeeming colors of the old nuptial poetry, so significant in that day, but now so long forgotten that its spirit and its diction have become a dead letter. Using old materi-

als, Shakespeare elevated, purified, and transformed them in a way not to be appreciated until his finished work is compared, at once more broadly and more closely, with that which went before; taking into view all his sources of suggestion, not merely those of current criticism.

The theory presented in these pages must stand or fall as an entirety. Yet it seems to me, whatever else its fate in the judgment of students, it at least, and at last, answers the long-standing accusation against Shakespeare of sympathy with race prejudice and indifference to the claims of the common people; for in this interpretation we have a black man, who was once a slave, rising by his own merit to become a commander over white nobles; awarded the surpassing love of the almost angelic Desdemona; above all, rendered in heart and soul truly worthy such devotion, and invested with a nobility and loftiness such as Shakespeare has bestowed upon no hero of his own race. And beyond this momentous meaning, the theory now presented, if true, throws a finer light than heretofore on Shakespeare's final attitude toward the great mystery of Christianity.

WELKER GIVEN.

CHICAGO, *January, 1899.*

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# THE OTHELLO.

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## CHAPTER I.

SHAKESPEARE'S GREATEST, MOST PERVERTED WORK.

BELIEVING Shakespeare's "Othello" at once the greatest and the most perverted of his works, I propose a theory of a restorative and reconstructive character as to that play: one not broached, or spoken of as possible, anywhere in the mass of literature which has grown up around the piece in the last two hundred years. Novel as this interpretation must seem, it is presented as the one actually and generally understood and accepted in Shakespeare's day; hidden from us by a strange warping of time. To support this view, I shall offer a statement of it in contrast with the prevailing theories, to show its essential fitness, then an exegesis of the play itself, and a consideration of the sidelights found in contemporary Elizabethan playwrights, together with a character study of Othello and

"The gentle lady married to the Moor."

The play of "Othello" has been pronounced by Lord Macaulay "perhaps the greatest work in the world"—a striking opinion from one of the most

omnivorous, yet critical, readers of ancient and modern literature that ever lived. It is evident, however, that, in forming this judgment, Macaulay did not test minutely the probabilities of a story which, in the accepted interpretation, first plunges a fair Venetian belle into a love marriage with a blackamoor chieftain, and in a few hours involves him in murderous marital mistrust and rage: the great essayist looked only to a development of passion so marvelously worked out that the self-poised, invincible, iron-willed general is caused to sink in a day under a conflict between love strong as death and jealousy cruel as the grave. The rush, sweep, and power of passion impressed Macaulay as would lightning and tempest: lost in the display of elemental force, he did not seek for fine harmonies in the action or story.

The brilliant English critic does not stand alone. Before and after Macaulay multitudes of acute and appreciative readers have been as much at fault as he in perceiving only the outer half of this play; for with all the enthusiastic applause bestowed upon the piece, even its warmest admirers have passed without notice certain strokes of dramaturgic art which ought to rank among the highest and finest in all Shakespeare. Others, admiring greatly the supreme poetry of the lines of the piece, have yet failed to perceive the real merit of the action; quite unable to sympathize with the devotion of a white wife to a black husband, they have felt constrained, with Wendell, to declare the plot "a thing apart" in the work of the poet, and dramatically a botch.

Others still have sought to reconstruct, soften, or gild the story. A gem—a gross crudity—the world's masterpiece—a thing brilliant in spots, but deformed and unworthy: can such clashing opinions be accounted for as the peculiarities and variances of individual taste when they come equally from ardent lovers of Shakespeare and alike from learned and unlearned?

The trouble is far deeper, and lies, as I shall maintain, in a pervading, general error of interpretation. This error indeed is one which quite frequently wrecks the whole play in minds that test it logically, although it may have comparatively little effect on those who catch the spirit of the piece instinctively or sympathetically, without knowing why perhaps, or being consciously dependent on reason or analysis. Unfortunately, however, the readers who admire fervently without such "living reasons" as Othello speaks of are not numerous, not fully satisfied in their own minds by Macaulay's bold generality, and they have increasingly few converts or followers in the later generations which persistently call for a sign. If such a perversion as I assert has in fact been fastened upon the "Othello" by modern misinterpretation, the play can be rescued for the mass of intelligent readers, and demonstrated worthy the place assigned it in Macaulay's fine sympathies, only by a logical correction of the deforming error and the assignment of full and abundant reasons for casting it aside.

It is no wonder the two classes of minds are in

conflict. As the story has been taken it was inevitable that those more logical than poetically luminous should have come to think this play "broadly handled," or, if we dared speak it so profanely, an affair of blood and thundering rage, marvelous for power, but not an example of the finer manifestations of dramaturgic art. But it has been viewed awry. An unperceived delicacy of delineation by the poet, and a peculiar, potent warping of time, I believe to be the causes of a deplorable modern deflection which has brought the readers of a realistic age more and more to think the meaning fully set out in the lurid and heroic passages so loved by the robustious, periwig-pated fellows of the stage; to believe the whole tale simply one of the ruin, through false animal jealousy, of a passionate, harem-bred barbarian, with everything concentrated on the crude but fearfully intense passion of the Moor, and without any careful regard to probability or harmony of plot. "Broadly handled" and almost "a gore piece" are the expressions of logical critics, such as Wendell and Young, who concede the play to be unrivaled for power and passion. This opinion of a crude and coarse development, saved only by its tremendous power, quite generally acquiesced in at present except by those who, like Archer, repudiate the piece as wholly unworthy a place in dramatic art, I believe to be one of the most serious errors into which critics of the drama have fallen; and I affirm that even the opinions now on record which are most superebullient in praise of the play are yet woefully

inadequate and stop far short of a true appreciation of this tragic tale as it was written and as it was once generally understood.

Not that truly sympathetic or appreciative critics have ever been grudging of praise for the "Othello." After Macaulay we have many of the poetically minded who place it at the summit of Shakespeare's work, "Hamlet" itself giving way; among them Clarke, who says, "this arch tragedy stands unrivaled"; Boas, who esteems it "Shakespeare's crowning dramatic achievement"; Lewes, who pronounces it "the supreme masterpiece of dramatic art"; and Turnbull, who declares it "the unparagoned masterpiece." Yet I assert even these writers, in common with all the commentators both derogatory and doting who have left their judgments on record in the last two centuries, have failed entirely to perceive or elucidate the subtle secret of the extraordinary power of the play.

But it is not for the merits of the "Othello" as a masterpiece of literature simply that I propose a more extended inquiry into its meaning. Great as is the literary value, I believe it has a higher in displaying a conquest of alluring and besetting sensuous impulse which is more in keeping with the dramatic exigency than any depiction of destructive rage and jealousy could ever be. Further, I believe a study of this strangely overlooked secret of the play will afford us a revelation of the mind and heart of Shakespeare more significant and even grander than any hitherto noted—a disclosure of the poet in his personality as well as in the power of



his dramaturgic art. Simply as one of the greatest masterpieces of the drama the "Othello" would merit the best energies of criticism to get it out of the false gaze into which it has been thrown by modern misunderstanding and misrepresentation, but I shall aim to review it somewhat exhaustively in pursuit of a broader purpose, holding that when he came to write this play Shakespeare threw off the sad, depressed views of the baser passion which had long hung upon his genius, and was swept up to a portrayal of sensuous impulse completely conquered by heroic, Christianized manhood. | A supreme value of this play, when truly interpreted, lies, I believe, in a disclosure of certain overlooked masterstrokes of the playwright's skill which embody not only finer dramaturgic art than criticism has seen, but also Shakespeare's highest teaching in respect to such matters as sexual morality, race prejudice, and the great mystery of the Christian religion. | If so, the revelation is of great importance from the standpoint of either art, morals, or life, and calls for a fuller consideration than one might care to give the play merely as a literary work. Elsewhere in the plays there is much dispute whether the views expressed of Christianity are those of the playwright or only of his *dramatis personæ*, but in the "Othello," it seems to me, we may get behind the characters and see Shakespeare himself in his final attitude toward great questions of life and religion. No such interpretation has been put upon the play heretofore in all the prolonged and exhaustive study it has re-

ceived; and I am alive to the seeming presumption of offering such a one now, and to the necessity of adducing proofs that shall be indeed "probal to thinking."

First, let us put the "Othello" in a true perspective of distance and color.

Schlegel has justly complained of Iago that he "dissolves in the rudest manner the charm which imagination casts over the relation between the two sexes," and he might have added that Shakespeare came near this same offense in earlier years, when not under any necessity of depicting debasing enthrallment of body or mind, and when the only excuse for the venturesome exploit was that it was done in a poetic manner. Like Burns, like Byron and Boccaccio, like a great array of the poets of imagination and passion, Shakespeare at one time glorified the baser passion almost as a thing apart from its final purpose in the physical and spiritual necessities of the race.

The poem of "Venus and Adonis" was the worst abuse of Shakespeare's earlier career in the glorification of carnal beauty, and we are told every frail one in London had a copy of it on her table. Taine was too strong, however, in insisting there was little difference between the love of a woman and that of the charger's "youth's fair fee" in the poet's pictures of fleshly impulse at this stage of his career. Venus argues, indeed, that the palfrey, as he should,

"Welcomes the warm approach of sweet desire,"

and holds up the example as one for imitation, but strong assertion is made respecting the natural duty of Adonis to beget and leave his likeness upon the earth after he had passed away, although we have to recognize it as subordinate to the appeal to seize on advantage of the solicitation for its own sake. The subject is sensual; the manner of treatment sensuous. The reproductive impulse seems to be celebrated almost for itself alone—for its blandishments and seductions, for its animal fire and energy.

Just as other bodily appetites indulged solely for desire and without regard to ultimate purpose lead inevitably to discomfort, mal-ease, and misery, so with the great impulse of sex. So, too, with the glorification thereof in literature. From such error as "Venus and Adonis" there must be reaction or ruin: it was reaction which came to Shakespeare. Swifter, sooner, and more complete than with Burns or Byron, the recoil swept over Shakespeare almost immediately after "the first heir of his invention" was given to the world, and thereafter we find him through a long period oppressed and saddened by the erotic instinct as an affliction or calamity of mankind, with no longer any disposition to glorify its grosser allurements.

Clearly as this turn to sadness has been understood, criticism must remain shut out from great and important light respecting Shakespeare until it awakens to two great outgrowing and uplifting truths. We must know (1) that the "Othello" is the drama above all others which represents the re-

action of the poet from the youthful outbursts of sensualism in "Venus and Adonis"; and (2) that this piece, while marvelous for the development of passionate agony, carries along with it a more marvelous underplot once appreciated to the fullest extent, but now for many generations wholly lost both to readers and spectators sitting at the play—a depiction of impulse no longer surrendered to base desire, no longer crimsoning maiden virtue, fouling marriage, and inflicting untold misery and debasement upon mankind, as in many of Shakespeare's earlier works, but rising at last into the blue heaven of love's purest story and displaying a star-like beauty such as was faintly prefigured in his first romantic tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet."

Popular appreciation of this play has been ardent, but in later days always inadequate. With its highest and finest beauty overclouded by the worst perversion and misinterpretation ever brought upon a literary work,—a mist which I hope in these pages to dispel,—the "Othello" has yet commanded wide admiration, for with all its supposed surpassing faults the world has loved it still. Without the aid of criticism, sympathetic readers have long instinctively, and from their premises illogically, interpreted the "Othello" as a portraiture of something more than passionate physical jealousy; as a work widely different from the erotic verse of the poet's youth. No difficulties of interpretation, no questionings of the critics, could dim or scant to them the essential poetry and romance of the blackamoor warrior

who, returned from the wars, hailed as a hero of the day, and with his unaccustomed eyes dazzled by Venetian society, in responding to the old senator's questions about his stormy and adventurous career, had all unconsciously pictured his own manhood and his own worth to the fair daughter who listened with a deepening interest in one who had arisen heroically above his own lowly race to become a general over the army of Venice. Unlearned critics have long dwelt with fondness on this pure romantic picture, and art has found a favorite theme in portraying Othello telling the story of his life to Desdemona and her father, or later defending himself before the Senate for stealing away the old man's child and heir. We see that Othello's story revealed him in the maiden's appreciative and luminous eyes, not merely as brave and heroic, but as pre-eminently one of that class of whom it may be said that

"The bravest are the tenderest,  
The loving are the daring."

So many who could not explain or defend the black-white marriage have still felt great beauty in the play. Sympathetic readers feel from the first, despite all appearances or suggestions to the contrary, that the affection of Othello and Desdemona was singularly pure and poetic in its rise; that the blackamoor warrior aimed only to respond to Brabantio's queries when he told of the battles, sieges, and fortunes he had passed, of disastrous chances, of moving accidents by flood and field, and the distressful strokes



which his youth had suffered. It has been felt by all poetically minded readers that the affection between Othello and Desdemona was somehow anomalous in the same manner and degree in which it was distinguished by a peculiar and unusual beauty. Whatever difficulties may prevail elsewhere, in that famous first act, explanatory of the past career of the pair,—a singular thing in Shakespeare's dramaturgic methods, and yet one of his finest,—the situation has a charm which can never fade, and which no study or analysis can make plainer than we catch it as it fell from the poet's pen. On the one side we have the chivalric warrior, as generous and gentle as he was heroic, brought for the first time from the life of the camp to the splendors and riches of the proudest Christian city of the world, and on the other a maiden who, reared amid the influences of art, music, and wealth, is the most beautiful product of that city, and awakens from her soft, exquisite life to find the thrill of wonder and marvel in the tales told by the blackamoor chieftain. Surprise, wonder, marvel, enthrall both, and upon the maiden falls the added magic of pity for the man who, in telling of his deeds, all unconsciously revealed himself. Rich in all that wealth and culture could give, the home-keeping Desdemona appears to us unmoved by her aristocratic suitors, and despite the wanderlust of her race, to which Othello's strange and adventurous career at first appealed, we are charmed at the natural and inevitable kindling of her pity, then her love.

Yet with all this appreciation of the richness and pure beauty of the play, it seems as if even the most sympathetic have too easily limited their vision to the foothills in the preliminary uplift of the first act and shut away the ranges and mountain peaks which lie farther back where Alps on Alps arise.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE NEW-OLD SOLUTION.

WHEN early in his literary career Shakespeare enumerated the sorrows which should attend on true love,—the perversities which should overwhelm it in song and story,—he did not mention any unwholesome, morbid affinity of black and white, but left that wholly to the diabolical life of the Eleazers and Aarons. No playwright ever sought more eagerly for vast contrasts to be overcome by a vaster power of love, but at that time he thought the obstructions, which were to strengthen the current, must be found in disparity of years, station, and fortune; or in having war, death, or sickness lay siege to Cupid's sway: he, with other Elizabethan poets, paused long on the bounds of Ethiopia before he thought of crossing and perplexing imagination, not with a base alliance as before, but with a pure marital love between a black-visaged warrior from Mauritania and a fair maid of Venice. But in the fullness of developed genius there came a time for him to venture even that.

It was a bold thing to bring a coal-black Moor on the stage as the husband of a delicate, loving white bride. Englishmen of that day knew little of Moors, usually confusing them with negroes, and Shakespeare probably never saw a black

man of either race. The Moor was known in the wars of distant lands as a fierce and terrible fighter, who had to be rewarded and applauded; as a valued mercenary, but naturally irreligious, treacherous, vicious, and repulsive, with the stamp of the infernal regions on his skin. Shakespeare's patrons would have given a unanimous and vigorous reply to the notable taunt of the abolition struggle in America over two hundred years later, whether one would want his sister to marry a black man. But we have strangely forgotten that if Shakespeare may never have seen a face which was blackened by nature, he had no doubt many times gazed, as a child, in excited and wondering awe on the artificially stained ones of the "black souls" in the old miracle or mystery play at the outdoor performance at Coventry. The dark-skinned faces of the doomed in the old mystery had so associated blackness and depravity that the first great Moor who appeared in the secular drama of the Elizabethans in lawful love with a white woman was nevertheless termed "a hell-begotten fiend." It was scarcely less than audacious for Shakespeare to bring another of that color upon the scene as the husband of a lovely white wife and call upon the playgoers to hail him as noble, to sympathize with the joy of his marriage, and lament its sadness when assailed by fate and villainy. That was a new order of things to the Elizabethans; and the real truth of it is new to us. I believe there remains no more important, fascinating, yet neglected, question in Shakespearean study than how the poet came to risk such an ex-

traordinary marriage and what measures he took to palliate it—to rescue it from offense and invest it with poetic and pathetic beauty.

The modern conception of Othello as a man only a little darker than a Spaniard, and as fit in color as in other respects to attract Desdemona's love glances, could never have been intended by Shakespeare. Not only are the faces of the "black souls," and of the preceding and contemporary Moors of the stage against it, but the marriage of Othello and the fair Venetian is presented to us as utterly shocking and unnatural because of Othello's blackness; Desdemona herself having shook with fear of him at first, and others having described the union as one likely to have begun in the practice of foul, lecherous arts upon the young maiden and to end in the birth of a despised, hybrid offspring. Brabantio admired Othello as a soldier; he abhorred him as a son-in-law. If Othello had been only "tawny," like the Prince of Morocco, and not in strong, offensive contrast to Desdemona, Brabantio could not have objected to him; for he was the most distinguished man in Venice, and in character worthy even the magnifico's fair daughter; while the plain but astounding thing here essayed by Shakespeare, in his love for bold and thrilling surprises, is that of a man as black in the face as a "black soul," or an Eleazer or an Aaron, being yet so white within that the fair belle of Venice could rightly fall in love with him. Black in the face, but white and noble in spirit—what manner of Moor was that to astound and perplex the Elizabethans? As we shall



see hereafter, in exploring a somewhat new field of Shakespearean study, it was the blackened faces of the old religious miracle or mystery play which suggested the introduction of dark visages into the secular drama in the form of Moors, and it was at that same source Shakespeare found a suggestion of the means by which to extenuate the marriage of a refined white woman with a black. His debt to the mystery is greater than to Cinthio.

Prepared to mitigate the marriage in due time, Shakespeare first sought to exploit the blackness of Othello, and his contrast to Desdemona, to the uttermost. Since he wrote for the stage, and the black face of Othello would keep the contrast steadily before the eyes of the playgoers, it was not necessary to emphasize the Moor's complexion in the text, yet we have not only the "thick lips" and "sooty bosom," but other extreme and painful suggestions which seem to accentuate the offensive side of the marriage beyond any possible redemption. He never could have done this had he intended simply to gloss over the marriage or divert attention from its offensive side. It was because he held in reserve a resplendent mitigation for even the worst phase of the apparently repulsive union that Shakespeare first threw the seeming unnaturalness and offensiveness of the marriage upon the playgoers with redoubled force.

It was near the close of his life as a playwright, provided at last, as I think, with a needed transforming dramatic concept, that Shakespeare boldly crossed the line where poets and dramatists had



paused in their search for startling contrasts—challenged his world with the spectacle of mutually honoring marital love between a black husband and a white wife. Plainly intending to throw the contrast upon us in utmost shock and intensity, he does not take us through any conciliatory scenes of love-growth and courtship which might have been so wrought as to appease and gradually dull the edge of our disgust; he thrusts the pair upon the stage already married, and contrives that the first accounts of the union which we hear shall be vile ones from vile tongues. There can be no mistake that such a plan and such a beginning denote an intent to challenge the playgoer's attention by dealing boldly, openly, not evasively, with the long-forbidden union of opposing colors in marital life; and we soon see this purpose exposed in strong relief, all other features being reduced to a singular simplicity, and the story relieved of every complication which could interfere with or distract attention from the grand central design of a sexual love involved in the mightiest, most appalling discord of race.

Especially significant is it that the color-crossed love of Othello and Desdemona is not put before us in an early, immature state, as possibly only a thing of erratic fancy which we might hope to see repented of and abandoned in time. No: the lovers are already married and apparently on the verge of consequences never to be undone. The bold determination to force the startled playgoer to the brink of the shuddering abyss is unmis-

takable. It is solely to magnify and intensify the rank race difference that the story is simplified to a degree unknown in the other plays of Shakespeare. There is scarcely a digression, no extraneous matter, no fairies, no witches, no ghosts: as Wendell says, we do not have to translate ourselves into the spirit of a remote age to get in touch with the story. Any ordinary dramatist venturing the risk of a marriage of amalgamation would surely think it necessary, early as possible, to do something to promote a kindling feeling of interest in the mismatched lovers, but Shakespeare's first efforts are daringly directed toward placing the relation before us in a way to stimulate natural revulsion rather than to elicit a needed and reluctant sympathy. Supremely confident of his ability to justify in his own good time the exploit of joining black and white in honored marital bonds, he set out like a tight-rope walker who first magnifies his difficulties and excites the fears of the spectators in order to get all the help of contrast for a later triumphant exhibition of his skill. Determined to put the black-white difficulty before us in all its rankness, Shakespeare aggravates it fearfully in the disgusting language of Iago in the first account we get of the marriage. Stripped of all disconnected matter and everything that can draw away attention,—fashioned as a tale purely domestic and with nothing recondite as in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth,"—this tragedy is one in which the playwright concentrates his efforts on the one question of a marital relation which had theretofore been thought dis-

gusting in life and too abhorrent for literary art to touch with redeeming grace.\*

So strongly at first does the play present the suggestion of odious, morbid passion that, despite the unrivaled excellence of the verse, many accomplished literary critics, and unnumbered playgoers among the unlearned, have condemned the whole thing as unworthy Shakespeare or of any place in refined literature; the preliminary challenging and the darkening of the background—the playwright's characteristic "striking up"—still standing against him when the redeeming work of the whitened and developed contrast—his "stroking down"—is no longer seen. "I have," says Joseph Crosby, pointedly expressing the views of those who refuse to turn the blind side, "never seen a fair, beautiful Desdemona fondled on the stage by a black, burly, negro Othello without feeling intensest disgust." Such indeed would be the candid expression of untold numbers who have felt the gorge rise at the portrayal on the stage of sexual love between black and white, and have been ready to give sympathetic approval to the gibe and fleer and notable scorn of *Punch* in the famous query whether the play of "Othello" could be considered fit for an audience of the nineteenth century.

It is the blackness of the Moor alone which has excited this popular revulsion, for the actors have always been too true to Shakespeare's design to portray Othello as disagreeable in anything but

\* Eleazer antedated Othello, but his marriage remained utterly repulsive and without extenuation.

complexion. He was undoubtedly intended by the playwright to be just as long represented on the stage—a man of noble appearance and gallant military bearing, worthy all admiration and applause save only that his blackness stamped him as alien to the white race in marriage. Shakespeare intended him to be in appearance as in character elevated and commanding—in every respect but race and color a fit companion for Desdemona. So does he dramatically accentuate the one great, unconquerable difference. We can cast the “thick lips” aside as a fleer of jealous Roderigo, but the “sooty bosom” was a truth seen by a father who knew nature could not intend his daughter to mate with a black man, however noble.

The theatergoer in our day who feels rising anger and disgust at the first sight on the stage of the black Othello and his fair bride is no modern degenerate incapable of appreciating old-fashioned tragedy in full vigor, nor a person with a taste more fastidious than that of Shakespeare’s day. He is instead the true descendant of his Elizabethan ancestor, dilates with the same emotion and inherits a repugnance to intermarriage which time has changed only to weaken slightly if at all. He is in this particular essentially the same person Shakespeare had in mind in writing the “Othello,” his feeling of revulsion is the precise chord on which the dramatist intended first to play, and he would be affected first and last just as Shakespeare planned to affect and did affect the early playgoers, were it not for a peculiar warping of time in the



method and symbolism of the play which I shall presently inquire into with all needed minuteness.

Our century has fought battles terrible as any the world has known, and changed the face of a Western civilization to elevate men of African descent to just equality of political right; but when it comes to marriage of white and black the repugnance is well-nigh as strong now in both races as it was when the "Othello," was written, and still registers nature's persistent struggle to keep pure the blood of races.

Touched as we are with awakening disgust in the opening of the play, just as Shakespeare designed and just as were the early audiences, it is our supreme misfortune to be cut off by a modern deflection from following the transformation of the forbidden love as it unfolded in redeeming beauty before the appeased and finally delighted eyes of the Elizabethans. Not seeing this transfiguration, Shakespeare's greatest work is not simply dimmed in our eyes, but disfigured with a foul blotch; hence the writers who ask us to believe the "Othello" the masterpiece of the world's dramatic art all seek by evasive or by direct effort to get away from the essentially abhorrent and disgusting spectacle of black and white in marriage, so powerfully forced upon us in the opening of the play. They seek to obscure the seeming great ugly central fact of the drama which Shakespeare most did emphasize; to draw in chalk where he purposely and determinedly sketched in charcoal; to dissipate in clouds of idealism or abstraction or to

wipe away as with a sponge that inky complexion of the Moor, so repeatedly and strongly accentuated by the dramatist that he could not stop until even from the mouth of Othello himself it was declared to be "black and begrimed."

To expunge from the drama the precise contrast of race which Shakespeare rendered most glaring has been a difficult undertaking, but modern editors have persisted in it so successfully that neither on the stage nor in annotated and expurgated editions can the ordinary reader or playgoer easily find the Moor whom Shakespeare drew and described as "the black Othello." With the blackness refined into mere tawinness of complexion, the bold dramatic achievement based upon the staring race difficulty, and which is in truth the highest effort of Shakespeare's genius, has been sadly disfigured before modern eyes. Compelled at last to abandon the stage traditions of a Moor of raven hue as they come straight from Shakespeare's time, most modern actors whiten him into fitness for Desdemona in deference to audiences that cannot endure an inky African to have a light-faced, blushing wife, while the few who keep on the blackamoor a face like night get such scant patronage and abundant loathing and denunciation for their doubly dark representations that at the present rate of retrograde movement it must soon become impossible to play Othello anywhere with a coal-black skin.

While the prejudices of modern theatergoers have been appeased by whitening Othello into a



tawny brunette not offensive in contrast with his fair bride, the commentators have not been thoroughly successful in the effort to perform a like service for those who know the play from reading rather than from the stage performance. The difficulty here is in one way indeed much less than with playgoers, as readers do not have Othello's blackness before the bodily eye; and it is much easier to paint the blackamoor sufficiently white for their satisfaction by representing that he was a Moor, not a negro; that Shakespeare evidently knew little of the characteristics of the negro race when he assigned the "thick lips" to a Moor, and that Moors can be fairly regarded as the people of the white race who live farthest south and have the darkest complexion.

No one can doubt Shakespeare's purpose to portray the Moor as of commanding appearance and dignity, and it seems at first glance as if the black upon his face might also be toned down to inoffensiveness. So far everything seems to favor sketching the Moor in chalk instead of charcoal; but the next step is one of extreme difficulty for the thoughtful or studious who dwell upon and inquire into the piece, as careless playgoers or surface readers do not. If Othello is not black, there is no reason for the conflict over the marriage in the first place, or for the quick spontaneous rise of a peculiar jealousy within it—and the great wonder of Desdemona's love is taken away. If Othello was so nearly white as to be on a plane of proper equality with Desdemona, his self-generating anxieties and

fears are no longer pathetic and pitiable; they are contemptible. If the blackamoor is to be washed white, the strong color and contrast must disappear from the play or remain in it as anomalies without justification or explanation. On the other hand, the theatergoer, especially if not also a student of the printed page, has the disjointing of the play—the removal of the tragic principle through the whitening of Othello and the wiping out of the intense contrast to his bride—made up in some degree by the vocal and visible expressions of the actors, and is led to think there must be some adequate reason for the storm and stress, although he grasp it not. If he cannot explain the marriage, or make noble the jealous rage of the Moor, he feels that there must be some justification for both and suspects that the inability to give an adequate reason rests with him and is no fault of the play.

Without stopping now to dwell on the impropriety of whitening the Moor either by the arbitrary method of the actors in diluting both the stage paint and the lines, or the more ingenious effort of the commentators to refine his blackness away in reasoning and speculation, I remark again that neither was known in Shakespeare's time nor for ages after—that such sponging away of the strong intensified contrast with consequent damage to the wonder and marvel of Desdemona's love, and to the high, reverential fears of the Moor, was never thought of until our realistic, unpoetic century. An extraordinary circumstance, surely. The Elizabethans were vigorous haters of the black

race, victims of a more intense prejudice than anything we know, and were accustomed to having Moors portrayed on the stage as Eleazers and Aarons—detestible, sensual creatures, black alike within and without. We have no literary reviews or critiques of those days remaining to show in detail just how the Elizabethans took the "Othello," but such scraps as Burbage's funeral elegy are highly significant as to the nature of the effect produced, while the extent of the impression appears from the fact that the piece scored an exceptional popularity on the first production and long maintained it, as is shown by the frequent calls for new editions and the way it continued to hold the boards. The evidence, moreover, is incontestable to show there was no whitening of the Moor in those days, that the actors always used the blackest of paint upon his face. The Elizabethan Moor, before and after Othello, was usually not only black in color but repulsive in character. Egla, "the female Moor" in the "Spanish Curate," was declared by her mistress to be "a foil to set my beauty off," and she thought next in order she must have "the devil for a companion." Evanthe, in the "Wife for a Month," picturing ironically the dreadful things she might do, reaches a climax:

"I would take to me for my lust a Moor."

Beaumont bewailed "the orient pearl joined to the sooty Moor," but reflected that—

"So hath the diamond's bright ray been set  
In night and wedded to the negro jet."

Zanthia, in the "Knight of Malta," is painted as black in the face as in character; sketched to the Elizabethan taste as an Ethiop of raven complexion, lustful and irreligious. To her libidinous white love she says she cannot lisp,

"Nor my black cheeks put on a feignèd blush,"

for her complexion would not permit powder for white nor paint for red. Yet—

"I am full of pleasure in the touch  
As e'er a white-faced puppet of them all."

The infamous Mountferrat knows "it is not love but strong libidinous will" that inclines him to this "female Moor," whose arms were "jetty chains," and while he declares passion blind he yet has to contend that night makes the hues of Zanthia and the fair dame alike. Neither he nor any other character is blind to this Moor's color or tries to soften it. She is called a "black pudding," a "tinder box," one of "black shape and blacker actions"—"hell's perfect character"; "a pitchy cloud"; "a night hag of her black sire, the devil," "a branche black beauty," "a bacon face," "a chimney sweeper"—one that "hell fire cannot parch blacker than she is." Mountferrat's punishment is to seal in marriage his abominable love for the female Moor, to be banished and commanded to breed "young devilings."

Eleazer, in "Lust's Dominion," was unquestionably the Moor Shakespeare and his audiences had heard the most of, and he was described as "a devil,



a hell-begotten fiend," while he himself spoke of a disgrace "as inky as my face," and his associate Moors were said to have

"Staring faces black as jet."

Such was the complexion of the Moors who immediately preceded Othello on the Elizabethan stage. And Eleazer, like Othello, is described as a Moor of royal blood. What would Coleridge have thought of this parallel? He it was, chief among those who have struggled to whiten Othello, who asked whether we could imagine Shakespeare so "utterly ignorant as to make a barbarous negro plead royal birth." We may doubt whether Othello and Eleazer were intended as negroes, as we now know and distinguish the race, but they were meant to be thoroughly black—the very opposites of the white women with whom they were paired. The terms negro and Moor are applied indiscriminately to Eleazer, and in one place he is styled the "negro king."

(Since, then, the Elizabethans knew this play chiefly from the stage portrayal, and Othello, while kingly, was yet rendered as black as a tragedian's make-up would permit, we must face the fact of the early Moor-hating audiences weeping and sorrowing over an inter-racial marriage which the more tolerant and liberal ones of our time cannot endure.) The "Othello" gave no offense to the Elizabethans who risked their ribs getting into "cock-pit, galleries, boxes" to witness the piece. They did not demand that Desdemona's coal-black lover

should be treated like that other Moor whom they were delighted to have planted in the earth, breast deep, to famish and rave for food, with a sentence of death for anyone who should have pity on him. That kind of treatment they thought proper for one Moor who aspired to equality of sex with a white woman, but it was far otherwise with Othello. They recognized him as a hero of the loftiest spirit and character; they were moved to pity by the unmerited woes in which he and his fair Desdemona were involved.

So far from Othello's color being slurred over to the minds of the old playgoers, it remained just as Shakespeare intended it, the main source of the power and fascination of the piece. (The root idea of the play—the chief fountain of the piteous and the tragic—they found in the blackness of the Moor and in the startling and appalling dramatic difficulties arising from his union with a white bride of wondrous delicacy and purity.) They found tragic art and tragic woe in exactly that which nauseates us as something painful and repulsive. And yet, in all the minute and prolonged study bestowed upon this piece, it never seems to have occurred to commentators or editors that there must be a potent and luminous reason for the singular contrast between old-time and modern audiences in their attitude toward the root idea of the play.

It is my conviction that the repulsion of feeling against this play often experienced by cultivated people simply emphasizes our loss of the key to a work of marvelous beauty as well as power; indi-



cates that the time has come to ask whether, as the poet wrote the piece and the Elizabethans understood it, there was not behind and beneath and above the development of jealousy another strong development—some fascinating and powerful extenuation for the Moor, some half-justifying and moving plea in support of his white bride, wrought out in the peculiar method of Shakespeare, who did most delight to take a situation painful and repellent in actual life and clothe it in colors evoking a pathetic and thrilling interest.]

Depend upon it, the Elizabethans understood the play aright. And they assuredly saw something in the intermarriage which we do not; some powerful and piteous justification of "the black Othello," or they would have hissed the piece from the stage rather than have given it the tribute of their sorrow and their tears. And if, hating the mating of black and white as angrily as they did, their sympathies were worked upon and moved by a beauty in this marriage which has faded from modern perception, we have only to get back and view it through their eyes to escape the surpassing perplexity and contradiction in which the wedding plot has been involved in our time, and thus secure a welcome and needed revelation of Shakespeare.

[We are told in the funeral elegy of Burbage that the "chiefest part" in which "beyond the rest he moved the heart" was Othello. He excited the deepest sympathy playing the rôle of a black husband of a white wife to audiences quick and hot in their prejudice against Othello's color.] Surely this

must give us pause, especially, as the more liberal modern audiences so generally revolt. Burbage's part is further described as that of the "grieved Moor"—another surprise. Naturally we should expect an Elizabethan poet to characterize Othello in his passion as a madly jealous, furious, desperate Moor, a fierce, murderous, vengeful Moor (as he was at one time), but here we learn that he most moved the hearts of the Elizabethans in the hour when he gave way to sorrow rather than anger, when truth and honor seemed fading from his world, and the noble blackamoor's heart sank within him to find his lifelong ambition and even his occupation gone—all because his faith in womanly purity was lost. Oh, how bitter and moving such jealous agony as that—cruel, indeed, as the grave!

It was not the infuriated but the piteously and wondrously "grieved Moor" that wrought upon the early audiences. And yet they hated Moors ordinarily; looked upon them as fierce, brutal, barbarous creatures, as ill fitted to arouse sympathetic emotion in others as to feel it themselves. Why did they not see in Othello, as so many later generations have done, simply a hot-blooded African who thought himself cornuted by his white wife and roared through a terrific storm of animal jealousy and rage? They saw, of course, the fearful fury at one time, but at another they saw something that moved them more. Evidently some great change was wrought by Shakespeare in this play, some strange reversal was effected, when the

prejudiced early playgoers were compelled to sorrow with a "grieved Moor" and feel for him a greater pity than for Hamlet, Romeo, Brutus, or Lear. ✓

*omit* (Was a marriage of amalgamation ever painted in such colors before or since?) (What was it, then, that aroused such deep sympathy for the black man aggrieved and anguished by the supposed falsity of his white wife? What was there about such a marriage that Elizabethans should weep for it? Why did they not rather wish to see it destroyed and have the mismatched and offending pair get the punishment they deserved? ✓) (What is the meaning of the momentous circumstance of Moor-hating Elizabethans having their hearts moved for Othello more than for any other character Burbage played? The answer, it seems to me, is simple, and must be accepted even if it work a revolutionary change in the literature of this play. ✓)

/ Presenting a color taken from the damned in the miracle play, and having just contracted a monstrous marriage for which he ought to be punished, Othello was nevertheless portrayed by Shakespeare in a way to compel sympathy and fill out that singular contrast outlined by him long before of one with "the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil." Giving Othello that character and transforming the relation with Desdemona until it was worthy such a man, Shakespeare absolutely enforced Elizabethan sympathy for the Moor and his marriage. /

✓ Back in the old mediæval miracle or mystery play where Elizabethan dramatists found the sooty faces

of the "black souls," which they adapted and reproduced as Moors fully as wicked and forbidding, Shakespeare found also the device which was to redeem the union of a blackamoor joined in wedlock with a white—an abstinent, unconsummate, holy, spiritual marriage.

The supreme error of Shakespearean scholarship in dealing with this play lies in the failure to see that because of the very blackness of Othello his marriage with Desdemona had to be purely spiritual, platonic; without a thought of the physical relations of sex—formal and legal in respect to society and the law, yet in reality poetic only, void of offense and sublime in its transcendent chastity—that he took her in the form of wedlock, but to company with her never.

Taking the Moor as typical of all that was blackly anti-Christian, vengeful, and libidinous, Shakespeare works his magic upon Othello until he stands forth not only a Christian and an exalted hero, but the exemplar of that time which comes to the most ennobled manhood when it pants for a supersensuous love, abhorring and scorning all passionate or selfish desire; when it aspires to fix and seal and hold forever the breaking dawn, the early spring, to survive through life, with no advance to burning noon, no ripening summer, no autumn harvests—only the freshness, the fragrance, and the dew continued until death.

In this solution, which is now presented as new, but which is really old, the Moor is very black



without, but the whitest of men within, and appeals powerfully to rational sympathy.

[ This is the magic wand which converts the moral and artistic difficulties of the "Othello" into new and radiant beauties and shows us why, beyond his other parts, Burbage's Moor most moved the Elizabethan heart. ] Transfiguring what seemed irredeemably base into something immortally glorious, ennobling him, beautifying her, it adds an intense and peculiar pathos to a self-deception piteously poignant when seen to be born of a self-assumed marital austerity, but never to be excused or pitied if the Moor had required of Desdemona the discharge of the conjugal debt.

/ The proposition of a long-standing enigma in the "Othello" being solved by taking the marriage of the strange lovers as platonic solely and free of somatic gratification is to be proved only by a careful examination of the piece, scene by scene, and act by act, together with the offer of some explanation how a meaning properly belonging to the play can have remained so long unseen. An instinctive feeling is likely to arise of something far-fetched in the perception of an ideal and poetic marriage where many generations of readers and scholars have seen only a common one (or rather one uncommonly bad and repulsive); but there are good reasons, I think, to regard this sense of improbability as springing from a modern misconception, not from anything belonging properly to Shakespeare or rightly implicated in his art or method.

Simply because Shakespeare throws before us the

fact and form of legal marriage, it by no means follows that there must go with it the consummation of the accustomed hymeneal rites. In this instance a culmination could only be odious and offensive; and the bold suggestion of it may well be only for effect and contrast—a preliminary rousing of the imagination to be followed by an alternate soothing and reawakening by gentler methods. We are following a dramatist whose genius was as poetic and elevated as it was bold, and with whom we are not to assume the commonplace, the matter-of-fact; neither the tamely nor the offensively probable. We may anticipate either trite or gross naturalism from the novelists and dramatists of our time who aim at realism in the gross, and rarely risk the shock of cold water for glowing and ruddy reaction; but it was altogether different with the audacious genius of Shakespeare, which delighted in strong contrast, in swift recoil from the hideous and alarming to the surprise of the beautiful and true. Nothing could be more characteristic of his art than first to have the marriage come before us in the accounts of vile characters as a thing to excite disgust; then compel us to catch hopefully yet suspensively at glimpses of unusual and redeeming conditions hinted and half proved through act after act, but not demonstratively established until the close.

Bold and appalling contrast at the first; then a hope of Desdemona a saved virgin in marriage inspiringly suggested, but held in suspense until the last act—what could be more characteristic of



Shakespeare? To take a relation which disgusts the ordinary man or woman at first sight—a situation which in real life would be odious and painful—and develop it by slight and suspensive touches, following bold preliminary shock, into extenuation and redeeming beauty is always a delight with Shakespeare. And when we find him denoting, although with only the lighter touches of his art in its elusive and suspensive phase, a strangely fine development in a marriage first thought strangely abhorrent, it is a consummate blunder for us to sink lazily back into an assumption of the commonplace instead of responding to the secondary and gentler incitement of the imagination. That Shakespeare should essay the wonderful thing of a marriage of black and white which, shocking us at first, should gradually be caused to lose every tinge of offense and take on a fascinating and redeeming beauty, is in every way most natural and probable. / It is to the last degree improbable that he would place the love of white and black before us on the stage unless he intended to cover it with odium and condemnation, as in Aaron and Tamora, where the baseness of the relation matches in natural and social wrong the depravity of the pair who are parties to it, saving that he had in view the pleasing alternative of developing it in lawful marriage into a strange, redeeming beauty which should elevate it to the plane of such high characters as we have in this play. /

The theory now presented is no doubt revolutionary, but worthily so. It takes the play out of

the classification so long given it as "a thing apart" in the work of Shakespeare, because dealing powerfully but crudely and grossly with the mere furious animal jealousy of a black who thinks himself corrupted by a white wife. Instead, we have a theory which puts this play in line with the unfailing consistency of the Shakespearean drama, and displays it as a glorious work of art in the true order of the great playwright's development—the instance where he rose to his highest conception of purified love and threw upon a black-white marriage extenuation and palliation worthily characteristic of him as a dramaturgic artist, and differing from his other work only in surpassing it in beauty and pathos and disclosing his genius at its highest and finest.

The fact of a disjointed, unworthy, and discordant theory of this play having been long accepted only makes it the more urgent the wrong should be endured no longer, but ended speedily by the acceptance of a reasonable, worthy, truthful version.

Remembering that the grand difficulty which has involved the commentators in such a maze springs from the offensiveness of a completed inter-racial marriage, and harking back to the symbols of Elizabethan dramatists and poets in denoting the bliss or the stress of early marital life, we shall soon find circumstances to give us pause and cause us to wonder at the modern, matter-of-fact, dogmatic assumption of a common, or rather uncommonly bad, marriage when the method and spirit of the old dramaturgic art point unerringly to something dif-

ferent in this instance. We shall learn of a department of poetry now unknown, but flourishing and popular in Elizabeth's time, and denoting early joys of marital union in symbol and commemorative incident, of poetic and dramatic concepts of marriage strangely arrested after the ceremony, of virginity prolonged in a wedlock failing of natural completion, and of tragic complications springing from wedded inequality, such as render it in the highest degree unlikely Shakespeare could ever have intended a gross, disgusting union between a Moor dark as night and a maid fair as day when the familiar method of the hymenean touched by his genius could vest the union with dramatic pathos, power, and grandeur worthy of the piece.

Looking at the play in this way, we must learn to say of the love of Othello and Desdemona:

"'Twas strange, 'twas passing strange ;  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful."

And that was true of Othello's affection even more than of Desdemona's. She was very young; trusted wholly to impulse to guide her in affairs of the heart. He was double her age, a man whose position made him regardful of the proprieties of life and disposed to guard appearances as well as realities. He was the trusted chieftain commissioned by the grave and reverend senators; and he must have felt the need to justify his marriage to them and to those high circles in which they moved, and into which he had broken in the rudeness of elopement and secret marriage. A man

of Othello's character and position could not fail to appreciate the inequalities and dangers of the marriage into which he had so strangely entered. Such a man could not but apply the true Shakespearean test and judge the relation by its fitness or unfitness for the end and purpose of wedlock. (He would realize as Desdemona would not, and could not, the impossibility of introducing the hybrid product of such a marriage into the Venetian society to which both belonged.) In the hymeneal poetry of Shakespeare's time the conception of motherhood followed immediately upon the passing of virginity and was often brought into the bride-song, as in Randolph's lines:

"Methinks already I espy  
The cradles rock, the babies cry,  
And drowsy nurses lullaby."

Such, indeed, was always the spirit, if not the actual expression, of the old hymeneal poetry in the fragrance and color of which this play is so richly imbued. Motherhood was hailed at once upon the passing of maidenhood, and was celebrated in the bride-song, wherein the poets delighted to cast the horoscope for the firstborn within a twelve-month. Often, indeed, the anticipations of the poet were quicker, keener, than that. The thought, hope, and ambition of early motherhood followed immediately upon the bridal occasion; that result was looked forward to as the most ardently desired and welcome. The poets did not hesitate, in congratulating the bride, to hope for the firstborn to come to her in the shortest time possible, and in



one of his loftiest epithalamiums Ben Jonson appeals to the bridegroom to "informe the gentle womb." Maidens of fifteen and sixteen were hurried forward to grasp the prize of motherhood with hands eager yet almost infantile. Audiences familiar with such customs in life and such poetry could not but think it most natural for a man of Othello's years, position, and surroundings to pause to think of the natural end of marriage. And if so, how could he reconcile himself to casting upon Desdemona the motherhood of hybrid offspring? It could not be. Elsewhere we have in Shakespeare an abhorrent picture of a half-breed black-moor child born to a white mother,—“a babe as loathsome as a toad,” notwithstanding the love the black father bears for it and his pride in the fast color which never changes or betrays itself with blushing.

(The Moor who had a child born to him by the light-faced Tamora rejoiced in its half-blackness; taunted those whose color would flee their cheeks, and proudly declared his offspring a lad of another leer; but no white man shared his pride. Othello, too, was a Moor, but in character, in religion, sentiment, and ambition the very reverse of Aaron. Irregular marriage and hybrid offspring could bring no joy to him. His love was tinged with a beautiful and lofty idealism, springing from the nature of the man and the exceptional circumstances of his life, and we can see it was most natural that his affection for Desdemona should be purely platonic.)



Pitiful, wondrous pitiful indeed, that this grand hero should conceive for Desdemona an affection so heavenly and so full of renunciation that it forbade she should ever become a mother to a child of his!

Not until we see the fact of absolute abstinence in the marriage can we comprehend the beauty of Othello's love or feel the tragic agony of its final defeat.

### CHAPTER III.

#### PALLIATION FOR THE MARRIAGE AND THE MOOR.

THE critics who assume to pronounce the "Othello" a masterpiece of literature, without pointing to an adequate plot or offering any explanation of the great primary difficulties which have so vexed both learned and unlearned, have no right to such oracular opinions. From Wilson and Johnson to Boas and Moulton, Shakespeare admirers have gone into panegyric over the lines, sentiment, and sweep of passion, which all can appreciate, while they have left unreconciled the peculiar discords which have grated so harshly upon thousands, and which yet, properly understood, are the mainsprings of tragic pathos—the blackness of the Moor and his over-quick and seemingly unmanly doubts of loyal Desdemona.

I have dwelt on the first of these problems,—the offense of the marriage of amalgamation,—but there remains in the accepted interpretation the even more trying one of a man of lowly race, drawn as a hero, turning quickly and outrageously against the fair young bride who, loving him with ideal affection, is supposed also to give the blackamoor all of nature's proofs of devotion—more than one of his complexion could ask, expect, or rightly re-

ceive. If it were indeed so, her superiority of race and blood only proved her love the more deserving of fit return from him; not alone Desdemona's due, but the voice of Nature herself, would demand of Othello extraordinary trust and confidence in such a wife. If, therefore, as we are told by all the critics and all the commentators, Othello was accepted by Desdemona on a full equality, bounteously gratified, rewarded, endowed with all a woman could bestow,—received of her a demonstration of affection all the more worthy of profound appreciation because of her immense sacrifice and concession in ignoring her racial superiority,—and he then turned against her within a month, what shall ever make him in our eyes a hero rather than a dastard? To take the word of a disappointed office-seeker, not that of such a wife! Have we not a right to expect that wrong like this shall have some explanation or extenuation before we pay to the Moor the tribute of our sympathy and our tears?

The position of the critics and commentators who call upon us to admire fervently, but without trying to soften the ineffaceable fact of Othello proving quickly and falsely doubtful of a loving wife, is like that of one who should suddenly come upon a stranger apparently in violent grief and should say, Here is a noble man sadly overcome by unmerited sorrow: there can be no mistake—the tones of voice, gestures, and expressions of countenance are most true—those of an heroic nature breaking beneath a cruel load. This might all be, and yet the situation not be one for real and enlightened sym-

pathy. What is the nature of the man, what the character of the load put upon him? Did he exert himself faithfully to avoid it or to ward it off? Has he proved himself of courage and honest faith, or a craven and a white feather? Not until such queries as these are answered can we enter fully into the situation and sympathize with the grief which has come upon another. The tremulous tones of voice, the pained expression of face, may arouse an instinctive feeling of pity, but that stops far short of the knowledge of motives and circumstances necessary to genuine sympathy either in life or literary art. Tears shed even at a deathbed may be crocodile, not real. The woman weeping over the soldier off to the wars may be neither mother, wife, or sweetheart, nor in any way respectable. The nardier, with his sign "Veteran of Waterloo," was neither patriot nor hero, but a robber of the dead.

Whether in our daily affairs or in literature, real sympathetic interest must have a deeper, stronger support than mere outward expression or appearance of affliction. However a man may groan, moan, or writhe in distress, for true sympathy we must know something of what lies behind—of the person and the manner in which he has become involved—whether by accident, through his own fault, or perchance through a cruel and wrongful deflection of some generous and honoring impulse—and just as the circumstances disclose one condition or the other will the fellow feeling of pity be awakened in greater or less intensity. If, where the pathos is just, we are to experience any true or

adequate compassion we must be taken fully into the secret; must be touched by the highminded and worthy purpose or supposed duty animating a well-meaning character, and, passing on, have this feeling grow and expand into a deep anxiety and sorrow, as we see villainy or chance turning a noble purpose against itself and inflicting bitter and undeserved suffering. In life and in story, only as we know the inner struggles and inspirations of the person can we enter into genuine sympathy with him in his more or less undeserved sorrow.


But what of "this man, this Moor"? Unnumbered critics and commentators have told us the tones of Othello's agony and passion are powerful, most true, unquestionably those of a noble nature in the toils, just as they have assured us Desdemona is all sweetness and the marriage really beautiful; but in the one case, as in the other, we should be entitled to something more than a mere outward seeming, even if that were pleasing and not, as in this instance, on its face contradictory and, in one view certainly, forbidding and repelling. Our need in respect to Othello is not for the instinctive feeling aroused by his early half-suppressed moans or by the tremendous bursts of his later uncontrolled fury. These outward evidences, if we heed them alone, may strike us as true and powerful, and so command a certain responsive sympathy, but for tragic pathos and power we must be taken much farther. There must be some secret deeper than surface seeming into which we are to be taken if we are to



feel the compassion of tragedy for Othello when, not a month married by the longest estimate, he turns without cause, and seemingly with shameful weakness, against the woman who had just given up home, friends, fortune, and country in her boundless love for him. Nature tells us a woman who could do that deserves manhood's fullest debt of trust and honor. However offensive her act of amalgamation may be to us, to the blackamoor it could only be the last, most grateful proof of devotion—one that called in return for a measure of confidence pressed down, heaped up, and running over.

It is even more vitally necessary to the tragedy that we should be able to enter into Othello's feelings and to sorrow with him than that we should look tenderly upon Desdemona as one not sullied or stained in delicacy; but every consideration of art requires the play to meet both these conditions. To gain one without the other cannot suffice; but a consummated marriage renders both impossible. To follow Coleridge in thinking the jealousy of the Moor lofty and beautiful while his marriage remains actual and unpalliated is possible only for minds which sink all logic in imagination.

Why did Shakespeare thus doubly and deliberately involve himself? Are we to suppose he did not see his way out of a complication so ruinous? The modern device of straining the language and the situation to whiten Othello into a proper husband will not do; it may indeed save Desdemona and wipe offense away from the marital relation, but if it button up these difficulties it unbuttons worse in



taking away all explanation of the furious opposition and storm over the marriage, and also in leaving the accepted and bountified Moor without excuse or palliation for his outrageously sudden suspicion, if his wife was indeed giving him nature's last proof of devotion.


If the marriage was not unconsummated we are taken into no confidence, shown nothing that can account for or excuse the Moor's conduct. "Even Othello," says Symonds, "falls into Iago's trap so stupidly as to refrigerate our feelings." Critics like Archer, and a host of the unlearned who are not to be overcome by mere outward emblems of woe, but who ask for some logic in the development of character and plot, have not been able to accept Othello's temptation in the theories offered heretofore. Supposed content and with perfect faith in Desdemona, the Moor, within thirty minutes from the time the first suspicion of her is broached, accepts a fixed belief of her infidelity and determines to kill her, and that too on the unsupported assertion of Iago, the defeated military rival of the man he named as her paramour. With liberal allowance for Iago's unequalled power of insinuation, and for poetic license in compressing the events of weeks within an hour, it is still incredible any honest and confiding husband of ordinary relations could be so overwhelmed after receiving a tribute the highest a woman could pay and in his case a proof of extraordinary devotion. Can we believe the upright Othello, receiving such evidence of devotion, would so quickly surrender to despicable

jealousy? Can Shakespeare have intended such incongruity? can he have fallen into it through carelessness?

If, as has been so freely and yet unwarrantably taken for granted, Othello was an actual husband accepting a husband's dues, he was bound to repay Desdemona with a husband's confidence, and his drop to final unbelief of his wife as a result of an interview of half an hour is the act of a dastard or an insanely jealous wretch, not of a man fit for rational sympathy. / Accepting the prevailing theory, thousands of unlearned playgoers have gazed dumbfoundedly on the scene of Othello's temptation, wondering what reason there could be why the noble, trusting Moor should so soon begin to show the whites of his eyes and writhe in mean jealousy. They could easily think of disappointment and disillusionment falling quickly upon Desdemona, but not that it should be so with Othello. [They can only suppose the ground must have been prepared in some way which they fail to see; but students know, as the play has been taken, there has been no credible explanation of the plunge of the noble Moor into a jealousy most ignoble and unworthy of the man.

It cannot help the matter to whiten Othello into a handsome Spaniard-like brunette, for just as we better fit him for Desdemona's embraces and suppose his actual acceptance by her, the meaner and more ungrateful his suspicions become.]

Did Shakespeare ever plunge into this desperate dilemma without a way out? If it seem utterly



impossible to adjust the conditions of a marriage of amalgamation so as to save the delicacy of a white bride and justify the sudden jealousy of a black husband who had been rewarded richly, lavishly, even unnaturally, and owed extraordinary trust in return, we must remember that in Shakespeare's art the greater the difficulty the greater the magic of overcoming it. What could more keenly excite the interest and curiosity of Elizabethan playgoers than to have them feel that the drama could be saved only by something seemingly impossible—a marriage harmless to the delicacy of Desdemona and mitigating the weakness of doubt in the Moor? How could that be? Yet without it how could Othello be saved as a hero of tragedy?

✓ If an Iago had ventured to whisper suspicion to any of the heroic and evenly, properly wedded characters of Shakespeare, the question would have been as to his own fate, not that of his story. Brutus would have felled at once a defamer of Portia; Macbeth would have struck to the earth the man who hinted of slander against the wifely honor of a woman whose little hand was red and conscience black with other crime. To listen weakly and credulously would render these men dastards, and so with Othello if married as they were. ✓ And how married otherwise—how a marriage harmless to the delicate bride and exculpatory of the bridegroom's quick fears? Deliberately involving himself in a situation where dramatic justification was seemingly impossible,



Shakespeare stimulated curiosity and doubt to the highest point as the best preparation for the subsequent revelation; but later generations see only the difficulty, not the solution, somewhat as Carlyle said the half-literal, half-parabolic writings of Goethe were "studied by dull heads in the literal sense alone." But it is not dullness which has blinded modern students to the redeeming grace of the "Othello."

There is an ample explanation of the jealousy, as of the color problem, in the great secret of the marriage, if we only have the aided, enlightened vision necessary in our day to see it. If we were amazed by the spectacle of dainty, delicate Desdemona wedded with a black, and with a forbidden marriage presented as the center of a poetic drama, the playwright certainly intended us to be startled with the additional perplexity of the superb Othello involved in the belittling and debasing passion of jealousy. Jealousy is naturally a mean, contemptible emotion, suited to comedy and satire rather than high tragedy—the last for which we can feel real sympathy, and the last for the noble Moor. Surely, then, our minds must be stimulated to look for some redeeming, palliating circumstance. Perceiving and feeling that it could never be dramatically right to involve the grand Othello in the meanness of common jealousy, Coleridge and other critics have been at pains to distinguish what they term his "noble agony" from the wretched fishing spirit of husbands like Leontes; but they have offered no adequate explanation why the passion so ignoble in



others could be sublimely pathetic in the Moor. They have felt the truth without being able to account for it.

Fatally erring and failing to get in true touch, the critics do not perceive that Othello's toils as a man of "perfect soul," yet smitten with doubts of his wife, should compel us to class his passion as a thing apart from common jealousy, and watch the action expectantly for the portrayal of it in some unique and touching form. Catching in this spirit the early vindication of the courtship from all wrong and grossness, and observing how perfectly it fits the exalted character of Othello, we should hearken confidently to his promise of a strange, reverent treatment of his bride; entering into the noble renunciation at the first, we should watch it expand even as in every honest heart sympathy must grow with it; and after we have joyed over the birth and growth of the glorious barbarian's purpose we must inevitably grieve as it is warped and turned awry, until at last we see the lowly humility of a black man, who took his white bride in the resolve to keep her in sacred reserve, so abused that her holy isolation from him seems perverted into base opportunity for another, and he believes Desdemona has outraged him in soul and honor as she never could in body. Then we see how Othello's early anxieties over the happiness and safety of the marriage had so worn upon him that when Iago began the temptation he had only to aggravate and inflame them into actual, positive doubt of Desdemona. So seen, the doubts and fears of the "grieved Moor,"

in his lonely spiritual marriage, lose all trace of animal jealousy and become both probable and piteous; his black complexion, absolutely necessary to his sufferings, exalts them and extenuates his weak confidence, even as it moves us with a pity we could never feel for a white and actual husband.

Thus the intense contrast of black and white in marriage, which literary art has so rarely dared to touch, becomes here the heart and the life of the tragedy, Shakespeare boldly and triumphantly crossing the line where other poets and dramatists have stopped, the splendid concept of the non-somatic union enabling him to join two of discordant races in a transfigured wedlock. So at last we behold in the unconsummated marriage the reason Shakespeare could venture such appalling complications; why, keeping Othello black, he could rescue Desdemona at last from a fate absolutely ruinous if the union was a completed one; why in the abstinent and unnatural strain of the Moor he could develop a jealousy neither mean nor base, but born of loneliness and aloofness, purged utterly of hurt desire, and yet running inevitably into cruel, undeserved sorrow. Such transfigured results can come only from a marriage which was itself transfigured.

The unconsummated marriage works the marvel of glorifying Othello's jealousy even as it accomplished the wonder of preserving Desdemona's delicacy. Failure to see it disjoins the whole plot.

If even to save hero and heroine and evolve a

great tragedy it seems in our time strangely indelicate or rude to press so far into the inner life of marriage, it was not so in Shakespeare's day, when throbbing nuptial poetry and daring hymeneal observances invited close approach to the bridal chamber and rendered its secret one for the highest tragic art—a truth vital to the “Othello.”

If Othello is whitened into an equalized and proper husband of Desdemona in consummated marriage, the great surprise, contrast, growth of the drama is lost; and all we gain in removing offensive blackness is more than offset by putting upon the Moor such a color and such relations that his jealousy must be mean, ignoble, animal, utterly destructive to a character for whom we ought to cherish a strong, enlightened sympathy; whereas we must feel a profound and true compassion when we see the early preparatory doubt of the marriage rooting itself, not in the sexuality of a common husband, warmed, rewarded, tributed,—mean and ungrateful beyond excuse in such a man,—but in denial and renunciation with assurance sapped away and the starved impulse of physical nature enforcing a severe revenge on the content of the lofty soul who had dared to defy her. Then offense drops from the blackness, and it becomes noble with pathos sounding in the language of the Moor, as witness: “Mine own weak merits”; “Haply for I am black”; “She had eyes and she chose me.”

✓ If, on the other hand, Othello was white enough to be accepted, and was accepted, by Desdemona as a husband, he was still a man of a lower race, and

he would owe her more than ordinary marital trust—a most unfaltering and grateful confidence. His turn against her would then be outrageous. Far different if only a husband in name and self-excluded. If Othello was so black that he could not accept from willing Desdemona what the meanest of white husbands could take—if he stood aloof in a reverent, holy, distant blackness, declining at honor's command a sacrifice ever ready and withstanding a temptation ever before him—then his position touches the chords of pathos just as it sounds also those of admiration, and he looms high among tragic heroes and his quick jealousy has sad reason and excuse.

Though married, Othello had all of an unwed lover's doubts and fears—the conjugal debt was not only unpaid, but he had put away all prospects of its payment—placed himself where a suitor's unrest was never to be calmed by acceptance as a husband—forever cut himself off from the assurance which he of all married men most did need, because of his ever present sense of lowliness, aloofness, and inequality of race. Here is the perfection of tragic pathos; a renunciation and abstinence glorious and honoring in the Moor, but perverted by the revenges of nature and by the craft of Iago into a constant trial and torment to the soul of the man who conceived it. / Alas, alas! Reject this interpretation, and the plot of the "Othello" must indeed be "an enigma" alike in a moral and a dramatic sense: accept it, and the story becomes at once one of the most perfect and exalted ever con-



ceived by genius, and capable of withstanding every test that can be applied to it.

Not seeing this, not perceiving the true nature of the quasi-marriage, with its cruel, doubt-breeding aloofness of sex, and hence incapable of appreciating the innermost tension of Othello, the commentators have been compelled to treat him as the victim of a jealousy which they are powerless to vest with fit attributes of palliation, elevation, or pathos. The same blunder which wrecks Desdemona's delicacy and fixes a repulsive marriage as the axial center of the play renders it impossible to put Othello in a position where there can be excuse for his quick-coming doubts. Realizing painfully that the passion of undiluted marital jealousy would convert the Moor into a pitiful rather than a pitiable character, Ulrici and others insist that where conjugal infidelity actually exists and is not falsely suspected indignation and grief over it should not be demeaning; and they then argue that, while Desdemona was not guilty, Othello fully believed she was. This is quite strained, even for the present time. In Shakespeare's day such reasoning would have provoked hooting. The wronged husband was then generally termed a cuckold and regarded like the contemptible victims of the cuckoo, which puts its eggs in the nests of other birds. The horns and the "horned plague" so frequently spoken of by Elizabethan playwrights refer to the appearance of the cuckoo; and its victims were thought fit representatives of the wretched and contemptible creature who could not retain the affections of his own



wife. Othello's dread of being made a cuckold—a fixed figure for the unmoving finger of scorn—is expressed with fiery and furious wrath, but we may be sure a black husband, jealous of a white wife and having such relations that he could think himself actually cornuted, would have been esteemed by the Elizabethans a fit subject for low comedy or satire, never for high tragedy.

While in his agony Othello calls himself a cuckold, the pathos of his situation lies in his not being such, in fact or in possibility, but in having pitiable, not pitiful, reasons for the doubts which seize upon him. The wretch who had so slight hold upon his wife that he could not retain her affections, or who had so little confidence in himself and in her that he could yield quickly to false suspicion, was always a contemptible character on the Elizabethan stage,—a cully, a cuckoo dupe,—and it transcends belief that the scholarship of later centuries should think Shakespeare actually intended to put upon Othello the toils of a quick, false, contemptible, morbid jealousy instead of perceiving how supremely needful it is we should feel forced to look for something different and higher—should be quick to enter into the suggestion of an abstinent marriage and the peculiar and extraordinary reasons it presents for a jealousy that was peculiar and extraordinary.

The conception of a marriage unconsummated because of the intense, disqualifying blackness of the Moor is a superb double stroke. It enabled Shakespeare not only to venture the color-crossed union, but to turn it into sweetness and grace, sav-

ing Desdemona in all her exquisite delicacy and redeeming the conjugal relation while it serves also in a most pathetic manner, when we know the inner truth of his abstention, to place Othello on a footing of unnatural and unequal restraint and abasement where he could be no cuckold, but, in his reserve and aloofness from his bride, could be preyed upon by the pitiable doubts of starved assurance until his noble renunciation becomes the sad source of irrepressible and unmerited anguish. In the secret of the unconsummated union we see a beauty in the marriage and feel a pathos in its ruin otherwise impossible. But we can neither sympathize with Othello nor understand Desdemona until we first perceive the wonder of the marriage. The truth is we are not, and cannot be, let into any adequate dramatic secret until we know that those who would expunge Othello's blackness from the play, in order to make him an acceptable husband, are striving to cast out the unparalleled dramatic power and pity of the Moor being unaccepted because of his own heroic choice, his reverence for his bride, and his determination to save her from a wrong maternity even against herself.

Failing to grasp this axial truth, Shakespearean editors and critics have involved the "Othello" in one of the densest mazes in literature. "All critics of name have been perplexed by the moral enigma which lies under this tragic tale." Such was the lament of the *Edinburgh Review* half a century ago over this play, and since then the confusion has only increased. The fact that the commentators feel in-

instinctively high truth and power in Othello's passion does not justify the incompleteness and imperfection of the theories they offer us, for they are like the spectator who can judge of the grief only by the tones of voice and expression of features, knowing nothing of the conditions of aggravation and extenuation and being in no sense on the inside.

Just as an occurrence which excites the mirth of strangers may be no laughing matter to us who are near of kin to the victim, or so well acquainted with the circumstances that we appreciate fully all matter of provocation or mitigation, so in the drama we must be taken back of surface appearances to the core of the actual motives and inducements and caused to feel the force of all the redeeming, excusing, or inciting influences that bore upon the hero. Only so can we have a rational sympathy, experience any full or adequate effect of literary art. We may appreciate highly the poetry and beauty of Othello's lines, and experience the sweep of a passion in the Moor which we recognize instinctively as nobly tragic and true, but we remain nevertheless outside the limits of an illumined or adequate appreciation until we know how and why the marriage is a thing of pathos and beauty void of offense; how and why the weak doubts and fears of the blackamoor husband spring from a piteous deception, not from a jealousy inevitably mean and a credulity almost insane, as would be the case if he were an accepted husband of either color, but especially so if black and was yet put on a plane of racial and connubial

equality with Desdemona. Immense confidence and trust would he owe her then. Quick suspicion of a woman showing such devotion would be dastardly.

Blind to these great truths of the tragedy, it is vain for Macaulay to pronounce this work the greatest in the world, when thousands of cultivated people turn shuddering away from the *mésalliance* of black and white. They have a right to ask for some "satisfying reason" why they should regard such a union with romantic interest and sympathy; why they should sorrow to have it assailed by Iago; why Othello's doubts of Desdemona, utterly wrong and without a scintilla of supporting truth, should nevertheless seem pitiable and sorrowful, not weakly and despicably credulous. The play can never be understood as a work of art until these things are placed in a thoroughly enlightened sympathy, and the Moor stands out in the light of Elizabethan marital custom fastened on the bride-bed as, even then and there, the victim of a jealousy not animal, but moral and spiritual solely.

Failing to understand that Othello took Desdemona to the protection and sanctity of wifedom, but never to company with her, the critics have had sorry work in applying the canons of criticism to this wonderful play. Some have struggled to whiten Othello in order to redeem Desdemona; others, ignoring her, keep him deeply black that some excuse for his quick doubts and rage may be found in the wearing and uneasy consciousness of inferiority of race; while others, despairing of com-



mon methods, strike for the stars, and strive to extort from the drama an abstract moral and meaning quite above and apart from the crude and unsatisfactory dramatic one they find in the actual fate of the characters. Thus Dowden in effect de-dramatizes the piece in the effort to reach a consolatory abstract lesson, when the actual experience and fate of the leading characters are so tragic and unrelieved.

While the theories put upon the "Othello" by modern critics are varied and contradictory, they are one and all open to the objection of leaving the piece without the explanation of an adequate central principle. (A high purpose or supposed duty, aimed at by the leading characters, but baffled and thwarted by fate or villainy, is the essence of tragedy; but where is it in this play as commonly interpreted? What is the lofty yet piteous aim of Othello and Desdemona—the worthy and beautiful, if mistaken, endeavor—in which they are foiled by Iago? Nothing, surely, but the preservation of the marriage. The whole conflict is over that; Iago seeking to break it down, Othello to preserve it. But surely there is nothing on the surface or exterior of a marriage of amalgamation which can be thought fit for the approving use of tragic art. Taken by itself, and without the support of some peculiar complication, there is nothing in the jealousy of a black man over a white wife, in a marriage of morbid attraction, to excite compassion. Disgust and repulsion are the feelings naturally aroused; and a black man's rage and grief in such a



situation would be ill suited to arouse sympathy in observers of either race. The case is one where there is a natural lack even of the first shallow or surface feeling of sympathy and interest which mere outward symbols of woe usually evoke. The situation is one where compassion cannot be awakened unless we can be taken into some deep truth differing strongly from outward appearances, and then be gradually worked upon in a way to arouse pity where ordinarily we should have none. )

If in all tragedies an explanation of the inner circumstances and motives of the hero is necessary to full and complete sympathy, such elucidation is doubly so here—indispensable to any degree of fellow-feeling whatever. Something must be done to remove the marriage of black and white from the hideousness of amalgamation into a light where the rays and hues of extenuating and pity-arousing circumstances shall rest upon and enfold it. Unless that is done by Shakespeare in the manner suggested, and in a way that renders this piece a miracle of dramatic genius, we shall have to concede that the poet, after choosing a degrading and unworthy subject, has sought to place his blunder in the most conspicuous and offensive light, emphasizing the fact of unnatural relations, and in a wrong, insulting manner asking us to consider an abhorrent marriage the subject of cruel and wicked attack, and a fit thing for our sorrow and our tears. We should be asked to weep and sorrow for the black man grandly struggling to maintain his marriage with a white wife; to execrate the villain who

tries to destroy this great and precious felicity. Can morbid sexual affinity be made sweet and tender in this way? If, as Professor Wilson said, our senses revolt with offense and loathing at the thought of fondling between black and white in real life, how are we to feel sympathy for the marriage of Othello and Desdemona and hope for its preservation from Iago's wiles when left to suppose it was an actual one of sex? If so, how are we to answer the flier of *Punch* at the play as one unfit for representation in our century?

The time must come when it will be a matter of wonder that Shakespearean scholars and readers could ever have been so blind as to think the poet left the relation of Othello and Desdemona as even impliedly one of unnatural desires. Every consideration of art and even of decency requires him to denote the opposite clearly, positively. The mere fact of rendering a *mésalliance* of race and color valid in law cannot redeem or justify it as a subject for tragic poetry where the feelings are to be enlisted and sympathy provoked. Shakespeare could not possibly be guilty of a blunder so monstrous as the critics and commentators have calmly fastened upon him; although not without sickening and disgusting numberless readers who, with all reverence for the poet, cannot believe even his genius capable of justifying and beautifying amalgamation of black and white. The theory of a consummated marriage, as accepted by the critics and commentators of every class and without exception, brings us to a *reductio ad absurdum* which leaves the

drama without a central principle or a plot capable of arousing even instinctive sympathy, taking everything away save the indestructible poetry of the lines; while the true theory of Shakespeare, which I now seek to bring back by a restorative study, leads us into a deeper truth, removes all grossness like a stain that is gone, and transforms the marriage into one that shall touch us with pity and anger when we see it cruelly assailed by Iago; which shall command our compassion and our tears when we see the great-souled barbarian struggling in its defense.

Only so can the "Othello" be esteemed a work of dramatic art. There is but one answer to the question which has puzzled many as to why tragedy pleases; why there should be fascination and interest in occurrences which are painful and repellent in real life. The action of the play transforms them. As Dr. Johnson says, we do not think the woe an actual one before us, but are caused to realize it as a possible one to ourselves, just as the mother weeps when she thinks her happy, healthful babe may be taken from her. The art of tragedy is to convert such painful things as murder, treason, marital wrong, by surrounding them with peculiar circumstances of palliation or excuse. As we are taken into the secret and feel the provocation or temptation which the hero suffers and are touched by fellow-feeling, perceiving, it may be, a generous impulse abused and taken advantage of, even in a way we have suffered and can never forget, minor though the circumstance may have been with us,

true sympathy is stirred; and we sorrow with deepening woe to see an error which is of the head, not heart, and really noble, outrageously perverted, and exaggerated to the injury of an honest man. Finally the wrong appears as one which we ourselves might have thrust upon us by a malicious enemy or a sad fate perverting worthy impulses and cruelly magnifying mistakes that lean to virtue's side. ( Sympathetic interest and even indignation come over us gradually as we see the essentially repellent action or situation overspread by extenuating circumstances, until at last it becomes one into which we ourselves must feel we might have been led had we been in the hero's place.

Macbeth's crimes are appalling, but sympathy will come for the brave and gallant soldier overborne by besetting ambition and the false counsels of a loved wife—it might be so with us. Hamlet's indecision is weak, but how would it be with us if we met a soul from the other world with terrible revelations, yet sometimes doubted whether the ghost be an honest one or no—a loved father's spirit or a goblin damned? Armed with power and dominion,—blessed with vast wealth or success,—we might possibly grow arrogant and full of the pride of life,—sipping the pleasure, neglecting the duty,—and like Lear provoke a fate which should bring us so low that we could cling with agonizing desperation to anything left of true love. Like Brutus, we might possibly be led to think that duty to country and patriotism required us to be false to friend-



ship. But perhaps nowhere in dramatic art can we find palliation and extenuation higher wrought than when woman's greatest crime appears almost a virtue in the light of amazing devotion, unselfishness, and sacrifice. The circumstances which extenuate a woman's impurity until it seems naught but unselfish devotion and sacrifice wring the heart with pity, as with "poor Columbine, forlorn and betrayed and dying out in the cold at midnight,—sinking down to hell perhaps,—making her last frantic appeal." As commonly interpreted, where shall we find in the "Othello" the fellow-feeling "too quick and elusive to be taken count of, but to be felt with, oh, what poignant sympathy"? But in the light of the unconsummated marriage where shall we find a tale of poetry or drama that has it stronger? And if we sympathize with Macbeth, Hamlet, Lear, Brutus, and with Columbine, shall we not, when we comprehend Othello's surpassingly noble renunciation, have for him a feeling profounder yet? Without it, how any true tragedy? )

Whenever we are to have the effect of poetic tragedy we must be taken into a secret and caused to see and feel the circumstances of extenuation and palliation which light up the "tragic fault" of the hero; and as this need is especially great in this play, where the difficulty of enlisting sympathy over the marriage is far beyond common, the attempt to deal with the plot without perceiving or imagining any such incubation or germination of pity for the black-white marriage has involved the construction, necessarily and inevitably, in a discord and perplex-



ity seemingly hopeless. It could not be otherwise. If there exists a tragedy where listeners need no process of education to bring them into touch and sympathy with the hero, it is certainly not the "Othello." Hamlet might sooner be played with Hamlet left out, than to have a Moor so little known to us that we see no glory of exceptional purpose in the marriage and cannot extenuate his fault in taking Desdemona in forbidden wedlock.

(An unconsummated marriage is indispensably necessary to this tragedy, but in Shakespeare's art it had to be indicated lightly by a method of his day; partly left to imagination; not demonstrated with rude, inartistic force; and hence there is much reason why latter-day critics, one and all, have failed to grasp the half-veiled justification, and so failing have been utterly unable to bring the play into any respectable or consistent theory.) It is almost pathetic that in the list of such failures we must include Edwin Booth, the actor whose fine sympathies taught him so truly the character of Othello that he departed from stage tradition in refusing to kiss Desdemona awake or in life, giving as a reason that "there is nothing of the animal in this noble savage"; and Furness, the luminous editor who is so deeply imbued with the fragrance and poetry of the play that he declares the love of the pair ideal and devoid of passion's alloy, and yet could not get so far away from the idea of relations of sex but that he finds it comforting to have Othello whitened into mere tawnniness. Coming so close to the truth, Booth and Furness nevertheless,

by the silence which gives consent, pass the scene of the nuptial celebration as denoting a consummation, and the summons of Othello later in the night, as Boas says, "from his marriage bed." They strive to think of the marriage as if between whites where a connubium might coexist with the highest ideal affection; but if that were indeed true there could be no reason for Booth's fine instinctive act of reserve and chasteness in refusing to kiss Desdemona, and Furness could have no occasion for comfort in the sight of Shakespeare's black Othello whitened into a quadroon. Lamentable that peculiarly enlightened Shakespeareans, grasping so much of the truth, should yet miss the entirety—that Booth could not know his finely correct act of chaste aloofness had a grander and truer support than any failure of animal appetite in Othello—that Furness should not have had the full courage of his convictions so that he could demand ever and always a thoroughly black Othello with no tolerance for or comfort in a whitened Moor.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE MAZE OF THE CRITICS.

THE "Othello" has been the subject of prolonged, laborious study; the comments upon it constitute a library, and yet the editors and critics only elucidate minor points, and do not solve the grand enigma. (The truth is, while the verse, dialogue, and development of passion make the "Othello" one of the wonders of the world, the difficulty presented by the conflict of race in marriage has never been explained to modern readers in a way to make the plot and characterization worthy the poetry.) The objections presented by writers like Adams and Archer have been evaded and avoided, not met, and the chief question with the defenders of the play has been as to the direction they would take in their efforts to "tramp out" of the corner. Two things had to be done in the opinion of writers who, not catching the idea of a marriage transformed by demonstrated chastity and renunciation within it, could only think of forcing some exterior change upon it. The two steps in this effort were: (1) to rescue the fair and delicate Desdemona from the stain of marrying a man of alien African blood and color; (2) to save the noble Moor or negro hero from the dastardly act of turning against a devoted wife at the first breath of suspicion from a source itself

wrong

wrong<sup>v</sup> honest Iago

most highly suspicious. The zeal with which these ends have been sought, and the ingenuity manifested in the effort, constitute one of the most interesting chapters in the history of Shakespearcan literature; but, while it must be conceded that the respective propositions have been buttressed with a formidable show of learning and logic, no writer has succeeded in bringing the two together in harmony.

Desdemona has been rescued at the cost of abandoning Othello, and *vice versa*, but a slight consideration will show that it is necessary to preserve both in order to have a tragedy characteristic of Shakespeare, or indeed any dramatist who respects the first principle of his art. It boots nothing to attempt the rescue of Desdemona's delicacy by toning her husband down into a "tawny Moor" and proceeding to construe away such epithets as "thick lips" and "sooty bosom" until the blackamoor is made up, or made over, into a fit marital companion for the Venetian with that whiter skin of hers than snow or monumental alabaster; for such a result can be accomplished only by taking all the wonder and marvel away from her love, leaving her affection for Othello as nothing extraordinary, and depriving us of any reasonable explanation of Brabantio's furious opposition to the match, his death of a broken heart, and of the appalling suddenness of the Moor's plunge into jealousy. (It is immaterial whether Shakespeare ever saw a real negro or whether he understood the difference between



an Ethiop and a Moor, for the fact remains that the whole tragedy and agony of the piece spring and must spring from an extreme, violent conflict of race. The two are made supremely fitted for each other in character and soul to emphasize the eternal tragedy of their unfitness in race and blood. If there were no unusual antagonism of color between the pair, no great difference of race temporarily and artificially glossed over by the idealism of love, the whole plot would be a mystery, there would be no occasion for the tumult and agony over the marriage, and the two ought to have lived happily ever after the wedding instead of encountering an unchecked stream of disaster.)

If there were no other objections to the whitening of Othello into some closer approach to Desdemona, (the exploit is open to the fatal one of leaving no excuse or extenuation for the Moor's lack of marital confidence. Being so well suited to Desdemona in soul and character, he needed only some reasonable degree of fitness in race and blood to make an ideal union and cause him to feel secure in a confidence so strong that nothing but an earthquake could shake it. Although the critics have not seen it, the contrary is true of the Moor from the first. [Othello's efforts to plume himself up as worthy of Desdemona are not in the least characteristic of his modest nature; they attest an uneasy striving for reassurance, just as does his extravagant burst of joy at finding Desdemona unchanged after an absence and separation of perhaps two weeks. We discern in Othello from the first; beneath his



outward calm, an uneasy, restless feeling such as would be the early product of unequal marriage, even when the disparity is nothing more than a considerable one of years. It was that same anxious fear, aggravated a thousandfold by the consciousness of his inferiority of race, which grew upon Othello from the hour of his marriage and made him so quick and easy a victim to the insinuations of Iago. It is pitiful, grievous, to see a noble-minded man so abused through his own manly humility, and the effect becomes highly tragic at last; but take away the race contrast, or reduce it to something inconsiderable, and the weak trust and jealousy of Othello become contemptible and unfit for high dramatic use. So it is that writers like Schlegel, ignoring the fate of Desdemona and striving only to solve the problem of the Moor's sudden turn to jealous rage, claim he was not only black in the face, but a fiery, sensual African, blacker yet at heart, and that his veneering of civilization dropped from him when the blood of the harem stirred in his veins.

Explaining the action in Schlegel's way, and giving this picturesque version of a jealousy quick as that of the seraglio, we may well strive to paint the Moor black as night. Thus Schlegel sees in Othello a jealousy of "that sensual sort which in torrid climes gives birth to imprisonment of wives and other barbarous usages," and recognizes in the man himself "the wild nature of that glowing zone which generates the most furious beasts of prey, the most deadly poisons,"

and thinks that "the physical force of passion puts to flight all his acquired and accustomed virtues and gives the savage within him the rule over the moral man." Desdemona, then, was a sacrifice to a savage, and the savage himself is so little above barbarism that his woes can hardly appeal to our sympathies with sufficient strength for tragedy.

(In a true development of tragic art as it has always been understood, and more especially in the time of Shakespeare, the woe must be such as purges the heart of the spectator with pity and sympathy for the victim. That certainly is not the case if we see Desdemona go to the sensual savage as a lamb to a tiger, and yet of her own choice and her own fault.) Coleridge, perhaps the most luminous of English critics, was one of the first to try to wash the black from Othello's face, for it was in his view "something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro," and "would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance in Desdemona which Shakespeare does not in the least appear to have contemplated." Looking to the other side of the great double difficulty, Schlegel, a critic standing in the first rank beside Coleridge himself, thinks the man of Desdemona's choice was a savage at bottom, who must needs have been very black without if his skin was to match the spirit within, and his quick, violent mistrust was to seem true to nature.

| The latest modern criticism foregoes the effort to wash the blackamoor white, and concedes his

utter blackness, not simply because he is so described throughout the play by himself, as well as others, but for the reason that without a great contrast in race there is no way of accounting for the clash and conflict over the marriage. The Moor is not to be thought of as repulsive or forbidding in appearance, but stamped and dyed as of a race alien to fair Desdemona. But does not this concession sully the delicacy of Desdemona beyond endurance?

I have already given the answer of the modern stage to that question made in response to the popular dislike of black and white in marriage—a dislike which has compelled it to abandon the traditions of the boards direct from Shakespeare's time and to present the Moor as almost white. That is against modern scholarship as well as stage tradition, and it disjoins the whole plot, but it has to be done as modern audiences grow more and more unwilling to tolerate the picture of black husband and white wife. The playgoer of this generation may not be satisfied with the enigma of Othello's action, and the failure of an adequate reason for the storm and stress over the marriage, but he would rather let all that stand unexplained than see the fair Desdemona taken to the arms of an African bridegroom.

Many expressions show how completely the old idealism of the "Othello" has faded from the matter-of-fact vision and analysis of the playgoers of the nineteenth century. There has come a time at last when the popular mind no longer retains any flavor or color of the ancient tradition respecting the

Moor and his bride, and, failing in its materialism and realism to conceive that there had ever been a better interpretation, it has arrogated to itself the merit of a searching modern analysis, laying bare the fact of the blackamoor chief and his bride being persons greatly deficient in refinement and delicacy and Shakespeare's supposed masterpiece a questionable thing.

Thus, John Quincy Adams says Desdemona "violated her duties to her father, her family, her sex, and her country," and adds:

"Desdemona is not false to her husband, but she has been false to the purity and delicacy of her sex and condition when she married him. . . Upon the stage her fondling of Othello is disgusting. Who in real life would have her for a sister, daughter, or wife?"

He insists that Desdemona's conjugal attraction to the black man proves her not merely deficient in delicacy, but a woman with "unsettled principles" and "little less than a wanton," prompted, not by pure love like Miranda and Juliet, but by "unnatural passion not to be named with delicacy." He says again:

"I must believe that in exhibiting a daughter of a Venetian nobleman of the highest rank eloping in the dead of night to marry a thick-lipped, wool-headed Moor, opening a train of consequences which lead to her own destruction by her husband's hands and to that of her father by a broken heart, he [Shakespeare] did not intend to present her as an example of the perfection of female virtue."



Adams is not insensible to the beauties of Desdemona's character, however, for he admits that in her relations with Othello after marriage she displays "the most affecting sweetness of temper, the most perfect artlessness, and the most endearing resignation." Yet, with an inconsistency fatal to such loveliness, he finds in her painful and even immoral lack of delicacy and reserve. To reconcile such expressions is impossible.

Professor Wilson feels a touch of the same trouble, and has to exert himself to find excuse for Desdemona. "You could not bear," he declares, "that an English Lady Desdemona—Lady Blanche Howard—should under any imaginable greatness marry General Toussaint or the Duke of Marmalado. Your senses revolt with offense and loathing. But on the stage some consciousness that everything is not as literally meant as it seems saves the play."

Charles Lamb took the opposite way to reconcile himself to Desdemona's choice of a husband. He thought that in reading the story we gloss over Othello's color, but on the stage when we see it with the bodily eye the coal-black bridegroom is in painful contrast to Desdemona. "I appeal to everyone who has seen Othello played whether he did not sink Othello's mind in his color; whether he did not find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona; whether the actual sight of the thing did not overweigh all that beautiful compromise we make in reading." To read of



Adam and Eve naked in the garden was different, he thought, from seeing them even in picture. "What we see upon the stage is body and bodily actions; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind and its movements."

Feminine students are as much in conflict as the other sex over Desdemona and her lover. Mary Preston ("Studies in Shakespeare") is compelled to save her heroine, not by taking a few shades from the blackamoor's color, but by making him entirely white. "We may regard the daub of black upon Othello's portrait as an ebullition of fancy, a freak of imagination—the visionary conception of an ideal figure—one of the few erroneous strokes of the great master's brush, the single blemish on a faultless work. Othello was a white man." This is revising Shakespeare with a vengeance. As Lewes says: "Othello is black—the very tragedy lies there; the whole force of the contrast, the whole pathos and extenuation of his doubts of Desdemona depend on this blackness." If Othello was white there could be no necessity for the tragic tale, no excuse for it, as he could then have married Desdemona with the hearty approval of her father and the joy of everybody else that the bride had done so well. The pair must then certainly have lived happily ever after, but they would give us no tragedy: Othello must be black for that. Mrs. Jameson accepts Othello with all his blackness, and yet finds Desdemona "an offering without blemish, all harmony, all grace, all purity, all tenderness, all truth." Rymer, on the other hand,

says her conduct is unworthy a country chambermaid.

Expressing the views reached by instinctive appreciation by the great majority of Shakespeare's readers rather than by any logical analysis, Hudson finds exquisite refinement in Desdemona and the highest nobility in a thoroughly black, and even outwardly forbidding, Othello, but keeps their marital relations far removed, that distance may lend enchantment to the view. Hence he is able to say: "Our heroic warrior's dark, rough exterior is found to inclose a heart strong as a giant's yet soft and sweet as infancy." He thinks it beautiful that Desdemona has the eye and the heart to recognize the proper complement of herself beneath such "an unprepossessing appearance" as Othello presented, and finds it difficult to say "whether his nobleness be more awful to her or her gentleness more awful to him." Thus, we are to understand, miscegenation may become a thing of beauty provided the man and woman are suited in mind and heart. There is certainly room to doubt whether Shakespeare intended the woman whom he sought to make the most beautifully refined and delicate, to find her "proper complement" in a black man of antagonistic race and unprepossessing appearance, with whom the natural end of marriage could not be attained without offense to nature and society, but if so,—if the William Shakespeare who had so keen a sense of family integrity that he judged wedlock always by its fitness for natural purpose, and had the great horror of mongrel off-

spring he has displayed elsewhere, really intended this—we may be sure he would put no further burden upon our distressed imaginations, but would feel bound to assist us in every way. In that event he would have thrown the intimacies of wedlock in a distant haze to favor such idealism as Hudson proposes, and not have made it impossible by permitting Iago to sicken and disgust us with his vile images of physical culmination; and then allow Othello to take us with him to the door of the nuptial chamber. Forcing us to face the great difficulty, Shakespeare has guarded against the evasive idealism of Hudson so carefully that it cannot be indulged in without first expurgating the passages that stand in the way and then forgetting them. / Despite all this, however, readers who trust to their feelings refuse to argue the question of the delicacy of Desdemona or make pleas of avoidance, but simply cry “fudge!” and reiterate the conviction that she was one—

“Whose life was, like the violet, sweet,  
As climbing jasmine pure.”

Two accomplished writers of recent activity sum up in their respective opinions all that has gone before. Lewes, usually acute and luminous, strangely passes the marriage with the old assumptions as if bride and groom were of the same race and the union could properly introduce Moorish half-caste or mulatto children to the aristocratic Venetian society where Desdemona belonged; but it is clear

he does not really look so far, only glosses it over as a matter of course that the ordinary relations are to be supposed, and supposed without offense. Following Hudson in this way, he occupies himself exclusively with the dialogue and verse, pointing out the transcendent merits there displayed and concluding that the piece is entitled to rank as "the supreme masterpiece of dramatic art." Archer manifests equal appreciation of the dialogue and poetry, and, while passing the marital relations with the same assumptions, is by no means inclined to consider the piece void of offense, but proceeds to a close analysis of the action which he thinks demonstrates the plot to be one of crude naturalism or pessimism, and the development without the artistic elevation necessary in the higher grades of literature. Despite all the surpassing beauty and power of the poetry, he is constrained to think *Punch* right in declaring the piece unfit for an audience of the nineteenth century. Archer remarks a strange and unaccountable looseness of construction growing out of the dramatic time, and he advances this difficulty as something new, having overlooked or forgotten the elaborate consideration and discussion it received from Professor Wilson long before. Archer is entirely original in the conclusion he draws from the condensed time and close sequence of the scenes, and he shows clearly that, as the play has been taken, Desdemona's guilt was a physical impossibility, and that truth must have been so well known to Othello that his suspicion was without



the slightest palliation or excuse, unless it is to be found in the ravings of an insane mind.

It is as difficult, under previous views of the plot, to question Archer's analysis of the action as to dispute the tribute both he and Lewes pay to the dialogue and the poetry. Archer, indeed, only takes up the ordinary view of the play and pushes it to a final analysis, and it would seem impossible to refute his conclusion except by some theory of the piece new from the beginning.

Archer describes sympathetically the circumstances under which *Punch* affirmed that "Shakespeare could not write a play for a nineteenth-century audience." The "Othello" provoked the gibe, and it was aimed not so much at the moral doctrine of the play, or lack of it, as at the crude pessimism which in the current interpretation does indeed seem to unfit the piece for a place among works of literary art. Archer thinks *Punch* spoke under circumstances of grave provocation. "Othello had been wildly overdone during the season. Every second week brought us a new Moor. He had commenced his career at Sadler's Wells, continued it at the Princess', and was now reigning supreme at the Lyceum." The editor of *Punch* had seen audience after audience listening to the play with the respect which the name of Shakespeare procured for it, and he wished to arouse those audiences to an analysis of the drama itself. Such an analysis, Archer thinks, proves the play inferior to the other great tragedies, and destitute of any ar-



tistic meaning worthy a high form of literature. He follows the piece closely through scene after scene to show the guilt of Cassio and Desdemona was a physical impossibility; that each could prove an alibi, and that the fact of criminality being out of the question was so well known to Othello that he could have been made the chief witness for the defense. This because "Cassio can by no possibility have been alone with Desdemona one instant since the marriage until that morning interview" on the heels of which Othello's suspicions started.

The time thread and sequence of the scenes, closely followed, proves that "Othello himself has been continually in Desdemona's company" from the time of the marriage to the hour wherein he begins to suspect her. Since guilt before the wedding is out of the question and the overpowering agony of Othello lies in having forced upon him the conviction of the wife who fondly loved him being turned away from him after marriage, Archer insists that the close-knit scenes which keep Desdemona so constantly with the Moor as to forestall any chance for wrong make the jealousy irrational and entitled to no sympathy, unless insane credulity is a fit thing for poetic tragedy. On other grounds he finds Othello's credulity monstrous, not pathetic. I must not be understood as assenting for one moment to Archer's analysis as complete and final, although it seems to me correct as far as it goes, and beyond refutation on any theory of the marriage heretofore advanced.

Widely different from Archer, but fully as destructive to the character of Othello, is the American critic, Snider, who strives to give probability to the action at the cost of any required surrender of beauty, grandeur, or merit in the personages. Not meeting the insuperable difficulty of a lack of opportunity for guilt, which had not been suggested when he wrote, Snider solves the problem of Othello's sudden change to jealousy by taking Iago's suspicion of the Moor to be true. He believes Othello has been guilty with Emilia, and "he is therefore aware that the infidelity of wives is a fact"; that "here lies the germ of his belief in the faithlessness of Desdemona." Guilty himself, he is unnaturally quick to suspect guilt in his wife, and Snider declares it impossible that an innocent and honest man could have been so easily led astray.

There are several reasons why Snider's view cannot be accepted. First is the fact of no word being spoken between Othello and Emilia when alone together which has the slightest suggestion of guilty relations past or present; nor does anyone in the drama breathe a suspicion of such a thing save Iago, who is quick to believe guilt in everybody, and yet in this instance could not conjure up anything stronger against Othello than his own unsupported "mere suspicion," as he himself described it. The foundation of Snider's theory—the idea that Othello's own guilty conscience is what makes him have so little confidence in the virtue of woman—is a doctrine specially refuted in this

same play in the person and character of Cassio, a pronounced gallant only too familiar with feminine degradation through his intimacy with Bianca and the general course of his illicit life, but who is nevertheless a firm believer in the reality of female virtue. His reverence for Desdemona as a pure woman is so boundless and flawless that Coleridge could well speak of it as a "religious love." Cassio's reverence for purity seems if anything heightened and strengthened by what he had known of the opposite. Even Iago tells us of base men in love having a nobility in their natures more than is native to them; and, with Cassio before our eyes to show the reverential faith Desdemona could inspire in a gay Lothario, we cannot think she would be less successful with the noble Moor, whose heart has been likened to a pure and spotless white mirror which reflects accurately all that is beautiful and true. Faults he may have had in youth, but his mature life was beyond the reach of detraction or suspicion, and it might well be his ideals of womanhood were like the broken joint Iago tells of, which when splintered grew stronger than before.

One broad lesson of the play seems to me the opposite of what Snider asserts in respect to masculine knowledge of female impurity in certain cases operating to breed a general doubt. If it were not so there are other considerations which appear fatal to this claim. Can it be possible Shakespeare put such noble sentiments in the mouth of a man who, believing he had won a bride of heavenly purity, would consent that she should have as companion

and constant attendant a woman with whom he had relations of *crim. con.*? It is impossible to believe such baseness of Othello. Snider's theory of Othello fails at last in the purpose for which it was wrought out, for after we shall have gone to the length of imagining the Moor guilty with the woman appointed to attend his bride, and shall have conceived that such guilt should make him basely suspicious of all virtue, when its effect upon Cassio is to leave his appreciation of goodness all unclouded, we have yet to face the fact of no opportunity for Desdemona's alleged crime having existed since the marriage, according to all previous interpretations, Snider's included, and Othello knows that to be true. What boots it to cudgel our brains to supply him some motive or impulse toward suspicion when our general theory of the action, if correct, shows Othello knew positively Cassio had no opportunity to woo Desdemona, much less to enter into guilty relations with her? With the camel swallowed, why strain at a gnat? Snider has to stain Othello with unspeakable degradation in the effort to account for his plunge into jealousy, and yet, even if we grant the motive claimed, he ends with making the Moor savagely jealous where he knew there was no opportunity for wrong. Unless Archer is right, and the plot essentially a botch, we must have some better theory of Othello's jealousy than one so forced and destructive in reaction.

Very different from Snider's is the method of Dowden, who gets rid of the marriage diffi-



culty, and indeed of every gross complication of earth, by soaring into the blue of the clouds. Dowden is one of those commentators who, encountering a discord in Shakespeare and finding no other relief at hand, do not hesitate to force explanations as they would not do for any other author in the world, and solve problems by ascribing to Shakespeare occult meanings and abstract philosophies, disconnected from the dramatic action, of which the playwright never dreamed. Thus, believing it necessary this play should have an ethical spirit and purpose, and being unable to discern any in the dramatic movement with the marriage regarded as somatic, he thinks it must be the lesson is an abstract one of conflict between good and evil rather than a mere individual or personal struggle between Othello and Iago. And this conflict is not only out of line with the actual human struggle between Othello and Iago, but in some respects irreconcilable with it.

Dowden's inconsistency is really self-exposed. He says Othello "must cease to live the moment he ceases to retain faith in the purity and goodness which were to him the most real things upon earth," or life must be thereafter "a cruel agony." Othello passes, indeed, into such disenchantment; he experiences the cruel agony of destroyed faith for a time, but, contrary to Dowden's theory, does not then seek death and does not meet it in fact until this position is entirely reversed. At the time of his self-inflicted death the storm has passed, the fearful self-deception is cleared away, and, as Dowden



himself says, Othello then "perceives his own calamitous error," and "recognizes Desdemona pure and loyal as she was," and "goodness is justified of her child." The illusion is at an end; the old ideals shine out gloriously as before; faith is restored in humanity and in Heaven.

It is not, therefore, the loss of faith in purity and goodness that makes Othello fall upon his sword, for that is restored to him—made triumphant. Not dying when his faith in abstract good was gone, but perishing when it is restored, his fate is, in direct opposition to Dowden's theory, purely personal and individual, and springs from no loss of ideals. (He rushes from a world beautiful with virtue and goodness because he thinks himself unfit to live in it.) Not seeking or expecting reunion with Desdemona in another world, he kills himself because her heaven can nevermore be one for him.

The demands of virtue in the abstract may be satisfied, and on that score Othello might be entitled to live; it is the intense personal guilt of slaying Desdemona which overpowers him—a fate purely personal in its cause and its lesson, just as Desdemona's also is a consequence of her wrong marital choice. Othello rushes madly from the world, not because it has become in itself dark and intolerable, for in truth his ideals shine again in a light relumed, but under the pressure of personal sorrow and anguish—under the destructive dramatic agony of knowing he had slain Desdemona in her sweetest innocence. The limit of sorrow is reached when the Moor appears as

“ . . . one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears, as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinable gum.”

And the quick poignant anguish, too much for mortal, follows when he stabs himself as in better days he would strike a malignant Turk for the abuse of a Venetian. The picture of anguish is the more vivid that it is set, not under a lowering sky devoid of beauty and ideals, but under one in which the stars shine brightly as of yore, presenting a “heavenly sight,” but one from which devils are to whip Othello.

To dissipate this intense, personal, self-provoked, retributive tragedy in a cloud of conflict between abstract good and abstract evil is most erroneous. If the awful pall which falls upon Othello and Desdemona is to be regarded cheerfully or resignedly as the triumph of abstract good over abstract evil, what principle of dramatic art can then excuse Shakespeare for having so needlessly and wantonly overwhelmed the two leading characters with weakness, fault, and calamity, butchering them for our high and general casuistic moral satisfaction? The fate of Desdemona especially is then traced to no appropriate “tragic fault” properly extenuated to excite our pity and pathos but never wiped out; her taking off becomes an unrelieved butchery, just as Dr. Johnson admitted when he said the death scene was intolerable and Furness confessed when he wished it had never been written. According to Dowden she

did just right; her career was one of moral beauty throughout, and ended in an apotheosis of goodness, and yet she was choked to death by her infuriated husband. Painful realism this, not soul-moving tragic poetry.

Far different is it, however, when we see the ultimate fate of Desdemona springing from her irretrievable but dramatically extenuated error in entering into an unnatural marriage and starting the chain of causes which leads to her death. Her end is then most pathetic and sorrowful, but has in it enough of fated and yet true justice to bring it out of the merely horrible into the region of the tragic.

And when Othello dies, self-murdered, anticipating that devils will forever drive him from the heavenly sight of Desdemona into deserved hell fire, it is vain to say his fate really stands for a triumph of goodness personified by him over evil personified by Iago.

It stands for the extenuated but irredeemable error of the marriage culminating pathetically yet naturally in inevitable wrong.

Only the prolonged and distressing failure to reconcile the marriage difficulty, or to extract some fit personal or dramatic lesson from the plot, could have induced a ripe Shakespearean scholar to seek zealously in the clouds for a meaning and a lesson which should properly be found near and plain upon the earth.

If the play is a tragedy with a tragic human ending, Shakespeare's course is perfectly true, but in

Dowden's theory it is inexplicable that he should have treated the Moor and his bride as he did; and we have only a powerful gore piece. At best the interpretation of Dowden comes out where it goes in, for however much we try to make the conflict an abstract one between good and evil, it is still one between Othello and Iago, and necessarily over the marriage and involving the whole difficulty thereof.

The conflict over the "Othello" has seemed peculiarly hopeless, not so much because the interpreters disagree among themselves as that no one of them has framed a theory consistent with itself and capable of explaining more than one side of the great double difficulty. One trouble may appear to be cleared away, but at the next turn chaos comes again.

1. If we agree with Coleridge and the long line of his followers, who save Desdemona from hateful and abhorrent amalgamation by making Othello merely a tawny Moor, it follows that the root idea of a vast difference of race overcome by a wondrous power of maiden love is cut out of the play. "Every jot of black from the Moor's face is so much from the wonder of Desdemona's love."

2. If Othello is whitened into a fit complexion for Desdemona, there is, moreover, no reason her father should have opposed the marriage or died of a broken heart on account of it, or indeed that there should be any tragedy. The play is without a central principle worthy an Elizabethan drama.



3. If, on the other hand, Othello was a sensual African, with the quick jealousy of the seraglio latent in his blood and aroused to fury by the first whisper of doubt, Desdemona is irretrievably sullied by intimacy with such a savage, and the whole plot is one of repulsive naturalism, offending against nature, destitute of artistic beauty, and as thoroughly non-Shakespearean in its story as the piece is truly Shakespearean in dialogue and verse.

4. If, with Turnbull, we first whiten Othello to fit him for Desdemona, and then blacken him to account for him as a jealous murderer, can any elaboration and charm of language persuade us Shakespeare really intended such incongruity?

5. If we seek escape from Othello's unnatural and unmanly turn by Snider's theory of his previous criminality with Emilia planting doubt in his mind, the explanation is in hopeless conflict with the broad lesson of the effect of such guilt on Cassio, who, despite it, continues a worshiper of female virtue; and it also stains Othello with the degradation of making a wanton his wife's companion, and befouls that wife by giving her a husband who is both black and adulterous. This out-Zolas Zola.

6. If, with writers like Boas and Hudson, we strive to get rid of the chief difficulty by throwing the pair into a poetic haze, closing our eyes to any relations between them except what we see with the bodily eye, we shall find Shakespeare has expressly provided that this shall not be done, and has planned instead to sting and wound the imagina-



tion, through Iago's offensive language and continued hymeneal suggestion, so that we must face and solve in some way the difficulty of black and white in marriage.

7. If we are capable of putting a sufficient glamour over the Moor to make him an actual husband to Desdemona, and yet have him surrender to jealousy with a suddenness showing him at heart unfit and without any true, well-grounded marital confidence, we shall find that the play is yet so constructed as to make the guilt of Desdemona a physical impossibility, on the line of any interpretation heretofore offered; and the Moor must have known this to be true. His rage is monstrous in its suddenness; incredible in that he must have known Desdemona could not be guilty. The theory which allows an opening for such incongruities must be wrong. There must be some ground for his rage; and he must have believed in some opportunity for guilt.

There is a sort of compound theory highly popular in the reading circles and clubs where only expurgated editions are used—a view which has the peculiar merit of reconciliation, for it leaves Othello with all of Shakespeare's deep contrasting black upon his face, and thus finds extenuation for his jealous enthrallment, while it also saves Desdemona from a wrongful marital contact; and all this through the assumption of the ultimate act which seals the marital bond being prorogued or adjourned by untoward events or circumstances—an expedient sometimes used by the dramatists, who

heighten an effect by removing a cup of bliss just as it is about to be tasted. Thus, on the night of the escapade wedding, we are told the call of war broke in to force Othello away from marital fruition, calling him first to the Senate and then on that very night to the field of arms. So far the theory works smoothly, but at the next step it begins to fail, and in the second act it is in irremediable conflict with the play, as anyone with the unexpurgated text before him must see.

Even before the first act is ended Brabantio ceases to attempt interference, the Senate gives consent for Desdemona to go with the Moor, and all restraints are so far removed that we can see no reason why she might not have sailed with him that night. In the next act the door of opportunity is opened wide. If in the opening scenes of the first act Shakespeare seemed to be working the familiar device of a fateful interference with marital raptures, it is soon dropped, and we behold in the next act the contrast of a most complete opportunity, strengthened and supported by circumstances which gave the added force of warm and seductive temptation. Events no longer operate to keep the black man off, but to bring him on. Shall we not quake then with renewed fear for Desdemona? Nothing could be more ominous than the nuptial celebration in the second act—an event universally understood in Shakespeare's time to indicate the removal of every restraint from the bridegroom and the payment of the conjugal debt by the wife. No wonder stu-

dents who have faced the full text in the light of the peculiar meaning of the nuptial celebration as generally understood have reached the unwelcome conclusion of a consummated marriage, with Othello summoned later in the night "from his marriage bed."

Here is the old dilemma again. Critics like Boas, who feel forced by the nuptial celebration to think of the pair as occupying the bed of marriage, can never preserve Desdemona in her delicacy save by whitening Othello into a properly accepted husband, and when they do that he becomes a contemptibly jealous wretch. Turn which way we may, the critics close one door of difficulty only to open another, while some aspects of the general enigma apply to them all.

One great and fatal defect, common to all theories now extant,—from Snider's belief of Othello getting fit retribution for his alleged adultery with Emilia to Dowden's vision of abstract virtue embodied and triumphant in him,—is that they give no extenuation, none of the necessary mitigation of tragedy—do not cause us to feel we might have done as the Moor and Desdemona in delicacy, innocence, and high honor. They fail to reach and sound the chord of fellow-feeling. The play is left without place or claim in Shakespeare's art—fails vitally. We can have no true Elizabethan tragedy until something appears which causes a woman sitting at the play to think she, in Desdemona's way, might have wedded with a Moor in unstained delicacy; a man that, if in Othello's place, he too

might have been constrained in honor to such quick doubts and rage.

Take any theory now extant, and the whole piece is disorganized. (The turmoil all comes from the marriage, and it remains a wrong thing, unpalliated and unfit for tragic use—a natural and indeed a proper source of trouble. What had Othello and Desdemona a right to expect? What anticipations were reasonable? Why should they think such a marriage could prosper? We know Desdemona is not false to her husband, but we feel, with Adams, she was false to her family, her sex, and her country in marrying Othello; her distress seems only the natural result of an act that boded no good. Her devotion is touching but misplaced, and we must think of the father, whose hopes and desires were outraged, and whose gray hairs were brought to bitterness. Othello's anxieties show real misery,—wretched is it for him to suspect so falsely loyal Desdemona,—yet we cannot but wonder why one so quick with his doubts should not have had sufficient misgivings to keep him out of a marriage which any sensible man would know could not come to any good. So long as we think of the marriage as common, and seek the dramatic lesson in the line of the theories ranging from that which attributes base guilt to Othello up to that which makes him an apotheosis of abstract virtue, the vital principle of an adequate transfiguration of the forbidden wedlock is utterly lacking, and we have only base realism of the school of Zola, the somewhat better of Snider and Schlegel, or, striving



higher, naught but the cold and distant abstraction of Dowden.)

If we cease to consider the play in and by itself, and view it broadly as marking one stage in the order and sequence of Shakespeare's work, the result is the same. Occupied as he had long been with studies in which painful and distressing aspects of erring sexual passion were surrounded with circumstances of mitigation and excuse appealing to the common sense of love-weakened human frailty, it is beyond belief that the great chief of romantic poets would then basely descend to the portrayal of a gross, sickening amalgamation where softening or palliation is wholly impossible. No consideration of poetic or dramaturgic art could suggest such a thing, only sheer horror and naturalism. Where, even in modern realism, has any veritist dared use miscegenation for dramatic purposes in the manner so long and so outrageously attributed to the great master of poetic and romantic drama? Designing characters for compassion and sketching scenes intended to awaken sympathy, it is incredible that Shakespeare could forget his art in producing this piece, and expect to command the tears of the Elizabethans with a black-white amalgamation, hopelessly offensive in nature even when valid in law.

In his previous work Shakespeare's portrayals of the baser passion were often distressing and painful, but the wrong was either condemned and punished, or, if the error was one of elevated characters, it was always tinged at last with heart-



moving palliation. We may feel reluctant to admit any touch or suggestion of fellow-feeling arising from the offenses of Angelo or Gertrude or Cressida,—we may not consciously think it a possibility we might have done as they under like stress and temptation,—but that is the underlying emotion nevertheless, and in no other way could the effect be truly dramatic. Men may sometimes be so strong and well they cannot realize they shall ever grow weak and faint,—may wax so proud in purse and wealth they can never think of poverty as possible to them,—but with the great passion of sex there is a consciousness that temptation must not be allowed too near; that guards and defenses are not to be neglected; that even comparatively slight imprudence may quickly bring one to a level where others are already suffering; that the wrong and the misery are ever within easy reach for even the best controlled.

Through this general sense of insecurity the one touch of nature is easily reached in the drama. Even though as firmly and exceptionally chaste as Angelo, temptation might suddenly spring upon us with a power no longer to be resisted. If wedded, like Gertrude, and with increase of appetite by what it fed on, we must realize it possible that an overpowering seduction might come upon us, sadly destroying good intent and forcing us to base wrong by the power of aberrant passion. Even Cressida's weakness is not without the pale of warm possibility, and so of sympathy. Shakespeare carries

extenuation of wrong appetite to a great limit. Even in the case of Gertrude and the King we half excuse the foul assassination, so strongly do we feel that the pair were victims rather than voluntary criminals; that the force of passion would scarcely permit them to do anything less than get rid of the obstacle in their way as best they might. This is Shakespeare's greatest extreme in invoking sympathy for amorous guilt; the closest approach to the line he never overstepped. Bold as are the demands upon our lenity in the name of erring desire, he has never asked any grain of compassion for rape, incest, or miscegenation, unless indeed he perpetrated the outrage in the last instance in the "Othello." (In all his previous and subsequent portrayals of betraying love in characters capable of exciting sympathy Shakespeare kept within the limit where palliation could be shown and the fellow-feeling touched, however base and wrong the act might be. The "Othello" alone is said to be a mysterious, unaccountable exception. Here we have a hero and heroine plunged into a relation where extenuation or excuse seems as impossible as true sympathy. If the purpose were only to emphasize the disgusting and repulsive, we might see why Shakespeare undertook it, but the characters are noble and intended to fasten upon our truest sympathies—the Moor one of the grandest of heroes and Desdemona so wondrous in loveliness that delicacy is wrought into the very verse forms of her speech so profuse in the feminine *cæsura*.)

The puzzle and maze of the critics can never be understood until we see that this exception is apparent, not real; that in art and in heartfelt mitigation of aberrant love this play differs from the others only in carrying the Shakespearean method to an issue higher and finer than before. Redeeming, touching excuse and mitigation are thrown upon the black-white union, just as upon other and more wrongful contacts, although by a new and striking device. ¶ We must sympathize with this pair as we never did with erring love before; and yet it is but the old palliative method of Shakespeare carried onward and upward and now reaching its finest ultimate triumph. The great difference is that, before, the cruel power of passion was the excuse for gross and actual wrong; now, we have a heavenly purity and honor offering piteous extenuation for an error which was one of form and outward appearance, not of actual conduct. Before, we saw the bed of marriage stained or maidenhood dishonored through passion's tyranny; now, we behold Othello saving a wrong-seeming marriage at the behest of a soul-love by sending Desdemona alone to her bride-bed in a saintly and devoted chastity.)

The scene of the nuptial celebration must be read in the reverse of the meaning put on it by the critics if the great error common to them all is ever to be corrected. It denotes not amalgamation or miscegenation, but transfiguration. We must hark back to the old hymeneal poetry and customs of Shakespeare's time to find the method in which

palliation and excuse are invoked for the black-white marriage by taking us to the nuptial chamber and disclosing the redeeming chastity and abstinence which transform the union and bring it home to our sympathies and our bosoms in a way forever impossible if the relations of Othello and Desdemona were those of consummated satisfaction.

Of all things we must beware of literalism—of the letter which killeth—and look, in Shakespeare, for the spirit which giveth life. It is true the usual purpose of the old nuptial poetry and custom was to denote marital consummation. But while Shakespeare adhered generally to the old method, he here turned it quickly, cut it short, made it flame out in thrilling and grateful surprise at the door of the nuptial chamber. Often, before, he had played the changes upon an arrested marriage stopping short of relations of sex. Mariana had furnished such an instance following a wedding of pre-contract; Helena another, when she sought by stratagem access to her husband's bed; and the Elizabethans could not have been wholly unprepared, after Shakespeare had so dealt with base or eccentric aberrations of the great impulse, to believe he would not stop without giving it an upward deflection toward the stars. That the underplot of a virginity retained in marriage should be developed in the case of Desdemona with greater delicacy, chasteness, mystery, vagueness than with Helena and Mariana, only made it the more beautiful and entrancing. If the artist had before dealt in open



lights and shades, his work became the finer when he threw it in penumbra.

Such fine artistic development before the common playgoer was possible in Shakespeare's day, because the usual marital result which the dramatist sought to negative was then a subject of special observance apart from the wedding ceremony and as embodied in the nuptial celebration. The religious rite wherein the priests blessed the bed of the newly married couple was still fresh in tradition; and the epithalamium or bride-song which celebrated the completion of marriage on the nuptial night was then in the bloom of its early and transient popularity in English verse. Hence a turn in the bride-song—a peculiar development of the nuptial celebration—an unexpected farewell—a singular absence of the bridegroom or an accidental summons finding him at night elsewhere than with his bride—these were only fresh surprises in an old method stimulating the dramatic interest and suspense of an Elizabethan audience.

Modern critics are hopelessly wrong, whether, with Boas, they are constrained to see Othello summoned in the night "from his marriage bed," or whether they aim to overlook the entire difficulty. Instead of striving to hold the imagination away from the physical relations of the pair, Shakespeare intends us to see straight through them and behold a condition which supplies the indispensable dramatic need of something to transfigure the supposed base amalgamation into a thing of beauty and pathos. | In the "Maid's Tragedy" of Beau-



mont and Fletcher we are told that when the pair first retired and the bride declared her resolution of denial there was "never such a nuptial night as that." But that of Othello and Desdemona is as much more wonderful as it is more truly chaste and powerful in the extenuation and palliation it provides. Unless we comprehend it, the higher power of this play remains a dead letter.

It is impossible that the old audiences, with their hot prejudices of race, could ever have been reconciled to the intermarriage on the ground taken by the ablest and most ingenious of our modern critics. Hazlitt says he leans toward Iago's estimate of Desdemona, "and all circumstances considered, and platronics out of the question, if we were to cast the complexion of Desdemona, we should say she had a very fair skin and very light auburn hair inclining to yellow. We at the same time give her credit for purity and delicacy of sentiment." Whatever the color of her hair, and the temperament disclosed by her skin, Desdemona's heart was of ideal purity and her love unfortunate only in being "too subtle potent, tuned too sharp in sweetness," and the Elizabethans so understood her.

Hazlitt is as far astray as the other critics. To correct the multiplied errors of criticism we need not endeavor to put an ethical meaning on the play as a whole, or strive for abstract moral lessons of warning or emulation in the individual characters: the simple test of artistic and dramaturgic fitness will suffice. Simply from the standpoint of his art as a playwright, it is altogether improbable Shakes-

peare could ever have written such a play as modern critics consider the "Othello" to be. The interpretation which later generations have put on it is one his own age could never have accepted. (Not as a matter of morality, but merely as one of dramatic art, Shakespeare's fellows would have found it easy to take the "Othello" as a tale of super-sensuous love; quite impossible to think it one of gross or offensive affinity. Above all things they praised Shakespeare for his supreme skill in weaving his plots so as to startle, excite, bewilder, and fascinate; to redeem, transform, palliate—compel the listener to fall in love with what he at first feared to look upon. Turning to the tributes which poets of his time paid to Shakespeare right after his death, one must soon be convinced that, as they knew the man and his method, nothing could be more unlikely than that he would permit a suggestion of such a thing as a miscegenation between superior characters to enter into one of his plots, unless, indeed, he did it only to prepare the way for a thrilling contrast and surprise in making the false appearance of repulsiveness transform itself into something of delight.) That they could quickly, readily believe. Above all things they praised him for the extenuation and fascination which his genius cast upon tragic themes—for the strange transfigurations which he worked out in his great tragedies, until the listener felt himself molded anew by heavenly fire. It was left for the realistic critics of later centuries, misled by the loss of the old nuptial poetry and other hymeneal lights of the Elizabethan

age, to suppose that one of Shakespeare's most carefully wrought works deals with a naked, unrelieved, unpalliated, and disgusting union of black and white in marriage. If Elizabethan poets ever turn in their graves it must be at this.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE DEBT TO THE MYSTERY PLAY.

JUST what crude old interludes, moralities, or plays Shakespeare may have witnessed when he and the English drama were both in early youth, we do not know; but his biographers are quite ready to believe he must have gone to Coventry, less than a day's journey from Stratford, to witness some of the annual productions of the Corpus Christi miracle or mystery drama, and have there received an impulse which stimulated and guided his early efforts as a playwright.

Anyone can readily fill out the details—the feverish expectation waiting for the day when the eager and expectant lad should see what he had heard talked of so long, the excitement of posting off with his companions to Coventry, the wonder over the marvels there unfolded on the movable, open-air stages: Adam and Eve in suits of white leather; the Supreme Being with gilded face and hair; the mouth of hell with immense jaws, filled with fierce teeth, opening and closing, while fire and smoke were seen within. After the return home these things would be talked about for weeks, months; some of them would certainly be imitated on a small scale by young Will and his companions. Halliwell-Phillipps points to several references in

Shakespeare which may be taken as echoes of the miracle or mystery drama, but I find much fresher and clearer ones in the poet's earliest work—"Titus Andronicus." Lovers of Shakespeare may dislike to recognize that crude, repulsive performance as one coming even from the 'prentice hand, and in some respects it is indeed to be regretted that the crude but strong boyish effort did not perish, although not from the standpoint of one who desires a comparative study of the poet's growth and development.

The first analogy indicated by Halliwell-Phillipps springs from Shakespeare's famous phrase "out-Herods Herod," as reflecting his recollection of the violence with which the hated king had raged in the slaughter of the innocents in the old mystery play. Referring to the scene in the Coventry mystery where "a soldier appears before Herod with a child on the end of his spear," Halliwell-Phillipps thinks the incident one "to be remembered, however rude may have been the property which represented the infant." Assuredly so; but it is singular so ripe a Shakespearean scholar should not have found more direct evidence of this early impression in the poet's first effort, written when the recollection of the mystery was fresh and strong upon him. It is not unlikely that parts of "Titus Andronicus" may have been written, or at least outlined in the young poet's mind, before he went to London, and while the scene of the soldier impaling the infant was still vivid in memory. In



this first play the nurse, when she brings in the hated blackamoor babe, tells Aaron the Empress "bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point"; and a moment later Demetrius breaks out: "I'll broach the tadpole on my rapier's point"—a threat which would have been executed as literally as by Herod's soldier in the mystery had not Aaron been present to rescue his ill-starred offspring.

Halliwell-Phillipps next cites Falstaff's comparison of the black flea on Bardolph's nose to "a black soul burning in hell." This, and the frequent references to condemned souls as black, he thinks are reflections of the scenes in the Coventry play where "the black or damned souls appeared with sooty faces." Undoubtedly so; but even more interesting proof is furnished in the fact of Aaron's entire character being cast in the very mold of a "black soul." This first Moor that Shakespeare drew, with the sooty damned in fresh recollection, is thoroughly black, but really Moorish only in that respect and in name. His newborn child is indeed described as "tawny," but because it is only a half-blood (a significant reminder to those who have thought the "tawny" Prince of Morocco a true Shakespearean Moor in color). Aaron has, in addition to dense blackness, woolly hair and thick lips, showing the confusion of negro characteristics. But these confused Moorish and negro traits are all the merest outward trapping; in spirit and character Aaron is a "black soul" of the mystery re-costumed and brought into the secular drama. He

is anti-Christian, "an irreligious Moor," and "a misbelieving Moor." The climax of his black spirit is reached when he breaks out:

"Let fools do good and fair men call for grace,  
Aaron will have his soul black like his face."

Aaron is not valiant like a Moor, but cowardly and base, surrendering himself and his child to a single Goth, apparently without a struggle. "Policy and stratagem" are his means of villainy. With negro and Moorish features laid on like a cloak, Aaron is at heart the base and treacherous "black soul" of the mystery, with no real Moorish valor or character.

But the influence of the mystery play upon Shakespeare's early work extends beyond Aaron's blackness of face and heart, or the threat of Demetrius to impale the babe. It is because the youthful Shakespeare was not yet emancipated from the crude horror of the miracle play that we have so much of that sort of thing in "Titus Andronicus." This "slaughterhouse" of a play, which so reeks and smells of blood, was written by a youth who had not come to himself, but struck out to depict some such horror and bodily suffering as he had seen in the crucifixion scenes of the mystery, wherein the Saviour was represented as enduring extreme agony, the nailing to the cross and wounding with spears being apparently so faithfully carried out that the actor who enacted the part seemed at last to be literally bleeding from every pore and bathed in blood from head to foot. "Oh, sir," said

an old Lancashire man of sixty, approached by Rev. John Shaw in 1644 on redemption through Christ, "I think I heard of that man you speak of once in a play at Kendall called Corpus Christi play, when there was a man on a tree and blood ran down." It was the influence of such models upon Shakespeare, in his raw youth, which inspired the blood and horror of "Titus Andronicus."

But whether the youthful Shakespeare saw the miracle play at Coventry is really immaterial. If he did not see it, unquestionably he heard accounts of it from eyewitnesses, who could give freshness to a story which he had listened to in one form or another from his earliest recollection. Doubtless he had heard old men tell of the features of the mystery as they had seen it enacted at various times; and his mother, being of a Catholic family, must have instilled into his mind those features pertaining to the blessed Virgin. The boyish imagination, however, would beyond doubt be most impressed by the scenes of crude horror and bodily torture attending the crucifixion and by the weird, black faces of the lost souls. The sooty visage would strike deep into the mind of a sensitive, imaginative lad who had never seen such a complexion in real life and could hardly think of it as fit for anything but the doomed. Undoubtedly Shakespeare and his playmates must have imitated scenes from the mystery, and we may well believe the future dramatist learned his first lessons in theatrical make-up by blackening his face with soot from the chimney. The miracle play contained no

feature which boys would catch more quickly or copy more certainly than that of the black faces. This early, vivid impression would not give way readily when later he learned of Moors as living black men, neither fiends nor lost spirits; he would find it difficult at first to think of them as beings of everyday life and character. Nothing could be more natural, therefore, than that his first crude efforts as a playwright should reflect the miracle play in picturing physical agonies and tortures, with at least one abominable and detestable black face darkening the scene from time to time. Calling Aaron a Moor, he would naturally paint him like a "black soul."

While the same old source that supplied the inspirations for horror and bodily pain furnished also the weirdness of the blackened face showing against the white, and the beauty of an unconsummated marriage, the latter was not then an episode that young Shakespeare would seek to introduce into the secular drama. Indeed, after his first turgid effort he began to discard nearly all the conceptions which he had taken from the mystery, being evidently dissatisfied with them. Realizing his error, he turns away from unpalliated horror, torture, and the blackened faces of the damned. The rapid improvement of public taste at this time doubtless aided the youthful Shakespeare's quick turn to better things; for even in dramatists who were not to be compared with him we notice within a decade a marked advance over the raw work of "Titus Andronicus" in the use of the same ma-



terials. While Shakespeare dropped the powerful black-white contrast as if resolved never to touch it again, the authors of the "Spanish Moor's Tragedy" took it up about ten years later in renewing the experiment. As with Shakespeare's Aaron, their Moor—Eleazer—is such only in name and outward trappings; irreligion and depravity unite with blackness of face to prove him a true descendant of the black soul of the old mystery. Eleazer is no better than Aaron, but there is an effort to elevate his relation with a white woman. The pair are lawfully married, whereas young Shakespeare had made the relation utterly lawless. Still more marked is the attempt to elevate the marriage, on one side at least, by representing the white wife as pure in heart and devoted in spirit, thus disclosing the aim of lesser playwrights, after a ten years' advance in taste, to throw extenuation over the black-white relation which Shakespeare had treated as thoroughly vile and then dropped as unfit for dramatic art. But the endeavor was not successful. The black-white marriage in "Lust's Dominion" remains utterly abominable; all the devotion of Maria cannot induce us to regard it with sympathy. At best we can only pity her, as if married to a loathsome drunkard or criminal. With taste rapidly improving this would seem likely to put an end to the effort to embody a black-white marriage in tragic poetry along the old lines; but five years later we find Shakespeare returning to the sources of his first theme, with his art at its highest and his genius amply instructed by



the early failures of himself and others, as well as by the higher suggestions of Cinthio and the mystery. He now finds that the powerful and weird contrast of black and white in the mystery play can be carried over to the relation of the sexes and brought into line with the requirements of the highest poetic art.

Disposed still to cater somewhat to the gross tastes of his audiences, Shakespeare had now learned that crude horror, bodily torture, and unnatural relations of sex can rarely receive the extenuation of dramatic art. Since the passing of barbarism we do not desire to pull out the tongues or chop off the hands of our enemies; nor do we think of such barbarism as something which may possibly be inflicted upon us. The agonies of crucifixion are not for us as spectators or possible victims. The belief that it might be so with us is lacking; we experience only the feeling of sheer horror, not that of a fellow-feeling; there is a failure of a true dramatic result. Quickly schooled in this general truth, Shakespeare had ceased to deal with love between black and white until in the perfection of his art he bethought him of a means to extenuate such a relationship in a way to bring it home to the noblest men and women as one into which they might have entered under like circumstances with no wrong to their hearts or their ideals. He will not now have the relationship wholly vile, as he had done with Aaron, nor will he attempt to redeem it for the wife alone, as others tried to do with Maria; he will transfigure it altogether. Learn-

ing much from the Italian tale of Cinthio, but more from the mystery, he will now give his Moor a fine personal appearance; a lofty, heroic, Christian character; but he will not repeat Giraldi's error of throwing him into marital relations inherently wrong and unfit for a truly elevated manhood. He will redeem and extenuate a marriage of black and white, causing motives of religion and purity to hold it unconsummated, and upon such beauty the lurid light of jealousy shall arise. We shall have beauty, pathos, and yet high unrelenting truth.

Even as in his life Shakespeare went back to pass his closing years at the scene of his youth, so in the round of his dramatic labor he returned near the close to a theme with which he began. No horrors and tortures now, but all the amazing contrast of the black face against the white; and in the same old mystery play where he first found that discord he now sees the one thing to redeem it in wedlock—an unconsummated union. The parallel is not exact; Shakespeare, as usual, recombines the dramatic materials. In the old mystery the black faces appeared in different scenes from those which told of the unconsummated marriage; the men of sooty visage had no relation to the maiden wife; they presented in their blackness a contrast only to the white faces of the saved. Grasping the black-white discord and converting it to his purpose, Shakespeare would not use it merely to distinguish the doomed from the saved, as in the mystery, but, as a secular dramatist, would naturally strive to involve

it in an aberrant love. Such had been the early effort, but it had failed to present the extenuation of true art; the relations of Aaron and Tamora arouse only horror and disgust. Now, in the fullness of his power and art, he returns to the old weird contrast, perceiving that if the aberrant love may turn upward, not downward, and be caused to touch the chord of fellow-feeling, he can win a glorious triumph where all others had failed before, himself included. From the same source whence he got the weird black-white contrast, which he once sought to entangle with basely aberrant love, he now gets the means to redeem it in sanctified marriage. Without questioning what Shakespeare owes to Cinthio and the Italian tale, we must see that his greatest debt was to the portrayal of the unconsummated marriage of Joseph and Mary in the old mystery.

Those who cannot think Shakespeare wrote "Titus Andronicus" may consistently hold that he rose to the peculiar art of the "Othello" without the need of a stepping-stone or intermediate experiment; that he withheld his hand altogether from a marriage of amalgamation until he was prepared to correct the error of a relation vicious on both sides, as in Aaron and Tamora; of a one-sided palliation, as with Maria; or of a Moor ennobled and heroic, but surrendered to relations essentially wrong in nature, if not in law, as in Cinthio's hero.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A CHORD THAT SOUNDS THROUGHOUT.

SINCE the *Edinburgh Review*, early in the nineteenth century, spoke of the "moral enigma" of the "Othello," which had "perplexed all critics of name," renewed and repeated efforts have been put forth to solve it, but, as I think, without any better success. The difficulties which have been pronounced moral are dramatic and sociological as well, but all hinge upon the wrongful intermarriage of black and white. As the play stands in current interpretations, with the marriage taken for granted as one of ordinary and consummated relations, the problems are:

- ①. How the delicacy of the surpassingly refined Desdemona is to be preserved, as dramatic integrity requires, in her supposed marriage with a blackamoor.

- ②. How the rise of weak doubts and a false marital jealousy can be dramatically correct in the character of the noble Moor.

- ③. How we are to supply the lack or explain the absence of the peculiar movement, vital to such tragedy as this, whereby the fatal fault or error of the leading characters is so extenuated as to command the sympathy and fellow-feeling of the spectators.



4. How this play, pre-eminently a study of sexual relations,—loveless but legal with Iago and Emilia, loving but lawless with Cassio and Bianca,—can be regarded as presenting no complication or extenuation in the case of Othello and Desdemona, but only an absolute, unredeemed, malodorous amalgamation, with no other or different palliation than that of being lawful.

Why of all places in his work should Shakespeare fail to palliate the tragic fault in this play; fail to invoke with his usual art and power an extenuation of the error of noble Othello and lovely Desdemona? What woman of delicacy witnessing the "Othello" has ever felt that in Desdemona's situation she too might have wedded a blackamoor; what man of generous impulse has thought if he were a noble Moor wedded to a fair Venetian he too might have given way to doubt and been ruined by false suspicion and jealousy? Yet for tragedy these things must be.

These are the great fundamental problems of the play, incapable of explanation under the accepted theories, but absolutely and fully met by the unconsummated marriage which puts a yet finer bloom of unconscious innocence on the delicacy of Desdemona, glorifies with pathos the doubts and fears of Othello, and above all supplies that development so long undiscerned by which the spectator is taken into a transmuting dramatic secret and brought to see the forbidden marriage in a true, rational, heart-moving light.

If such a redeemed marriage seems impossible at first, so much greater the magic and spell, so much the more wonderful the tragic movement, which render it as real as anything in the piece. To present a human relationship which is forbidding and seemingly beyond extenuation, and then to transform it slowly and grandly into a redemption which starts sympathy and tears is the very method of Shakespeare, and never more signally displayed than in this play.

But to expect such a disclosure, otherwise than by apt dramatic methods, would be unreasonable. An absolute announcement of the conditions which are to transform the marriage, and consequently the main action, from a thing of disgust to one of profoundly human interest could not well be permitted. The transformation must be wrought gradually, with hope rising and falling—never utterly cast down and never fully triumphant until the close. Such is what the "Othello" needs, and such is what Shakespeare gloriously supplied and what we may clearly see if we look for it in a true light and with undimmed vision.

Schlegel, speaking of the extremely offensive expressions of Iago in the opening scene which have been so generally expurgated from modern editions, says if Shakespeare had written for the present day he would not dare to hazard them. But this must certainly have ruined the truth of the picture. To Hudson the language of Iago is that of a spirit broke loose from the pit, but it will not do to soften or whiten it, for that takes away the just equinox

to virtue which the author was determined to portray in this hellish villain. To intensify dramatic effect Othello's complexion makes his marriage to Desdemona seem dark in the eyes of the spectator, and Iago's language then blackens it to the ear. This is the "striking up" peculiar to Shakespeare; the "stroking down" comes later. Early in the first scene Shakespeare strikes the main chord which is to vibrate throughout the play—repugnance of wedded black and white. We are thrown right into the excitement following the elopement and marriage of the beautiful white maiden and the blackamoor chief, and as Iago rouses Desdemona's father, a low, vulgar, repulsive picture of the union is forced upon our offended sense of decency in preparation for a poetic contrast later—language Adams found unquotable in plainer speaking times than the present:

"Zounds, sir, you're robb'd ; for shame, put on your gown ;  
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul.

Arise, arise ;

Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,  
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you."

Determined to shame Brabantio to rage and violence, Iago goes on with nauseous, foul-tongued reports, dragging the intermarriage down below human decency to the bestial plane:

Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God, if the devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, and you think we are ruffians, you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews

neigh to you ; you'll have coursers for cousins and gennets for germans.

*Bra.* What profane wretch art thou?

Roderigo then chimes in with his version of Desdemona's "gross revolt" in eloping with a black man, and gives a picturesque but slanderous account of her flight from her father's home:

"Transported, with no worse nor better guard  
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,  
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor."

No wonder the proud aristocratic Brabantio is agonized by these vile accounts of the monstrous conduct of his daughter. To him there is only one possible explanation of her act, and as he starts to pursue and reclaim her he cries:

"Is there not charms  
By which the property of youth and maidhood  
May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,  
Of some such thing?"

As Brabantio organizes his party and goes in pursuit of Desdemona he can think of no way to explain her unnatural conduct except by assuming that she was drugged. When he meets Othello he breaks out:

"O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?  
Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,  
So opposite to marriage that she shunn'd  
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,



Would ever have, to incur a general mock,  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight.  
Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense  
That thou hast practiced on her with foul charms;  
Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals  
That waken motion: I'll have't disputed on;  
'Tis probable, and palpable to thinking.  
I therefore apprehend and do attach thee  
For an abuser of the world, a practicer  
Of arts inhibited and out of warrant."

Othello preserves serene dignity, scorns to make a street scene, and is evidently confident he can vindicate himself at the proper time and place from all charges of wrong toward Desdemona, although far from certain that the marriage is essentially and inherently right.

"My parts, my title, and my perfect soul  
Shall manifest me rightly."

The marriage is legal; Othello stakes his honor as a soldier upon it, and expects his "perfect soul," or that pure love of the soul which is perfectly free from the body and its passion, to be made plain to all the world. Right here the poet strikes the secondary chord which is to echo and re-echo to the end of the drama. Physical intermarriage was the first,—marriage so offensive that Iago made it suggest animal progeny,—and for the second we have just the opposite—a sentiment so pure, so delicate that Othello can call it a perfect soul love.

The double-dealing Iago, as preternatural in his morbid activity of mind as in his satanic hardness

of heart, was hardly done torturing Brabantio with the fleer of unnatural love, rendering his daughter the victim of hideous passion, than we find him returning to Othello to play upon him in the reverse key. Just as the villain struck the main chord of the play in thrusting before Brabantio a picture of his daughter's alleged unnatural—almost bestial—passion, so we find him turning with strange mental agility to excite Othello's doubts of the marriage for the very reason that it had stopped short of natural completion. Mark his first question when he returns to Othello:

“ Are you fast married?”

The hinge of doubt here is not as to the validity of the ceremony, or the legality of the marriage itself, for there is no question as to those points, nor can it refer to any such accusation as that afterward brought by Brabantio of Desdemona having been corrupted by the foul arts of the Moor. Iago knows all about the marriage, and he is too familiar with the upright character of Othello to think for a moment of any such charge being proved against him. Iago's suggestion of a possible point of weakness in the union of Othello and Desdemona relates to an idea of a different nature, often employed by Shakespeare and quickly caught by his audiences—to the natural culmination of marriage, which in this instance would give us unpardonable offense if accomplished, but which if scorned in the inspirations of a heavenly love might give us cause for holiest tears. Yet, unaccomplished, the union

would be incomplete—exposed to Brabantio's attack. Failing to see how Iago strikes the secondary chord here with Othello, as shortly before he touched the main one with Brabantio, some writers have puzzled greatly why this piece should differ from the other great tragedies in having no under-plot. We shall see hereafter that solicitude as to Desdemona's fate in marriage will echo clear through the play and supply the secondary chord which sounds throughout.

It is not left for Iago alone to suggest the double view of the marriage; we find the keys of the by-plot softly but clearly sounded at several places in the opening scenes. What else can be the significance of Othello being so difficult to find on this night of the alarm and call to arms that three several quests were sent for him and he was discovered at last by accident in an unexpected quarter? "What makes he here?" was Cassio's question, and it shows that the Moor had not taken Desdemona to his official mansion, specially provided for the family of the commanding general, and which would surely have been an appropriate place under ordinary assumptions. But he has stow'd her elsewhere; and, parting from his bride of an hour, we find him in the street accompanied by a servant with a torch, as if betaking himself back to his own chambers, when he is discovered by the messengers. These circumstances may not mean much to us; they were surely suggestive to the audiences of Shakespeare's time. The intimation certainly was that Othello was not "fast married"

in the sense of a completed union, but might be treating his marriage as one above the claims of sex.

It can hardly be thought Othello had expected to remain an hour longer than was necessary in the unknown quarter where he had taken Desdemona and where he was beyond the call of the Senate. It was a time of opening war and danger, and Othello must have been expecting a summons any moment for the coming struggle at Cyprus. Under such circumstances he might put himself beyond reach of messengers from the Duke and the Senate possibly for a few hours, surely not for an entire day or night. It cannot be thought he intended to remain for a considerable time at unknown lodgings without even his lieutenant knowing where he could be found in case of emergency. An ill example that for a General in a critical time. Instead he took "French leave" from his official headquarters only long enough to accomplish the elopement and secret marriage, and then started back at once, leaving Desdemona behind, for the reason that their union was not intended to be one of marital intimacy. The street meeting with Iago and the messengers thus becomes a finely motivated incident displaying the care of the careful commander, arousing interest as to the singular marriage, forestalling our rising sense of disgust, and making delicate suggestion of the exceptional relations prevailing between Othello and his platonic bride. Read without this meaning, as it has been heretofore, the scene which displays Othello in the street an hour



after his marriage, and in an unknown locality where he was found by accident, is an awkward episode not in keeping with his character as a General, his situation as a bridegroom, or any need of the drama at this stage.

Iago seems to have known all the details and circumstances of the wedding better than anyone else, for he was first to raise the alarm in the hour after midnight, and Othello afterward speaks of him as the one who best knew where Desdemona could be found. As he was in the secret and knew what steps had been taken and those likely to come, there is special significance in the question he threw at Othello when he returned to find he had left Desdemona and was apparently returning to his headquarters—"Are you fast married?" Iago here gives the lie to his foul-tongued language in rousing Brabantio, and kindles the first dramatic hope of the marriage being the very opposite of his low picture of it to the poor old father. Then follows his artful insinuation of an incomplete union with Desdemona being taken advantage of by Brabantio to compel a divorce. Iago's true reason for desiring completion of the marriage was that he believed that would be its wreck, and Desdemona would then turn in disgust from the Moor. The hint that if not "fast married" the Moor might yet lose his bride was not lost on Englishmen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as it is apt to be with us. With them the fruition of marriage was a requisite so needful and welcome that they gave it special celebration instead of veiling it behind decorous

assumption. Ceremonies of espousal and of wedding, while customary, might be dispensed with, but a complete relationship was so necessary to a valid marriage that, in unions where it did not and could not occur, the law would grant a sentence of nullity without other or further reason. The Elizabethans, despite some of their poets, did not believe much in spiritual unions; the twain must become one flesh. Even if a most perfect wedding ceremony was had, the marriage was voidable if nature's rite could not and did not follow.

With such ideas fixed in the popular mind, and with the bride-song which celebrated the fruition of marital love as a literary delight of the day, the Elizabethan dramatists often carried their audiences along to the door and hour of the nuptial celebration. Shakespeare rarely touched this joyous lighter vein, for the evil in the love of man and woman weighed constantly upon him. But time and again he cast doubt over a marriage after a legal ceremony had been performed but while nature's culmination was yet in waiting. Helena, getting access by stratagem and under cover of silence and darkness to her churlish bridegroom, gives us a piteous phase, but in Othello and Desdemona we have one of higher pathos and beauty. The culmination sought elsewhere to complete conjugal love is here declined at the prompting of an affection which is of heaven, not the earth. That is what we find softly but clearly suggested in the putting away of the bride when Othello stow'd her elsewhere and, on the nuptial night, betook him-

self back to his own chambers. Looking back over this scene, so long passed as insignificant, we see how at the opening of the play, and from the mouth of a single character, we get the two opposing concepts of the marriage, as far apart "as hell's from heaven," which start the action with all the material for a by and main plot of intense interest.

Responding to the call of the messengers, Othello returns to the house to reassure Desdemona and break the alarm of war to her with his own lips, and then proceeds to the Senate, where he is to be crowned with honor, not condemned for crime. Brabantio renews the charge against Othello of corrupting the young maid with spells or drugs:

"She is abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted  
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;  
For nature so preposterously to err,  
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,  
Sans witchcraft could not."

That Desdemona was the last woman to wed a man of alien race, if in her right mind and senses, is the firm conviction of Brabantio as he renews his accusation:

"A maiden never bold;  
Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion  
Blush'd at herself; and she, in spite of nature,  
Of years, of country, credit, every thing,  
To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!  
It is a judgment maim'd and most imperfect  
That will confess perfection so could err  
Against all rules of nature, and must be driven  
To find out practices of cunning hell,  
Why this should be. I therefore vouch again

That with some mixtures powerful o'er the blood,  
Or with some dram conjured to this effect,  
He wrought upon her."

Just before and just after this last speech of Brabantio, Othello voices fully his noble defense, previously indicated by his absence in the street, which sounds like deep harmony answering offensive clamor—a defense which at once sweetens and purifies the whole atmosphere. Charged with lechery and foul arts, he defends himself and his bride with a simple manly avowal of the purest love, the most delicate and poetic sympathy and sentiment both on his side and hers. He had told her that lofty tale of his battles and sieges, his hairbreadth escapes, his adventures in strange lands and among strange peoples, and more especially of the distressful strokes of his youth, which touched the maiden heart first with compassion, next with heavenly love.

"My story being done,  
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs :  
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful."

This surely is a welcome poetic contrast to the repulsive views of the marriage announced by Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio; and a lively anxiety is excited in us to learn which shall prove right, although from the first we feel the truth of Othello's assertion:

"She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,  
And I loved her that she did pity them.  
This only is the witchcraft I have used."



Desdemona then comes upon the scene and confirms all Othello has asserted as to the voluntary nature of her affection and the lofty plane on which it rests. The artless simplicity of her plea is strangely convincing:

“That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world: my heart’s subdued  
Even to the very quality of my lord :  
I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,  
And to his honors and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,  
And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.”

Were it not so beautiful and touching, the simplicity of Desdemona would be almost amusing. Her situation as the white bride of a Moor would be a most trying and embarrassing one for a woman of ordinary consciousness, and would ordinarily compel shamefaced reserve of manner and suppression of speech. Not so with Desdemona. With her, physical relations are glorified and spiritualized into the ideal. She assumes the ideal, love-redeemed nature of her marriage is as clear to others as to herself, and, thinking of being near her hero, to listen to his voice, feel his protecting tenderness, and glory in his valorous achievements, she yet artlessly declares that she married the Moor “to live with him,” thus in a sense seeming to contradict Othello’s lofty professions. And she goes on in-

sisting that if he go to the war alone she will be cruelly deprived of the privileges of a wife.

If the grave and reverend signiors had taken Desdemona literally they would have been disgusted with her, but it is plain they saw it was supreme artless innocence and spiritual devotion which made her speak as no conscious woman could or would have spoken. With a charmingly idealized feeling as to the inner life of marriage, Desdemona can refer to it with a candor impossible in a more conscious or less supremely innocent woman. At this stage Desdemona has no idea there can be any question as to the rightfulness and beauty of her marriage with the Moor. At one time I was disposed to think she did not face the prospect of consummation until overwhelmed with sorrow, and in the hope of obtaining a vindication of her fidelity. But that is clearly erroneous. She took her wedding sheets with her when she eloped; she ordered them put upon her couch when she thought the bridal debt due. The most refined of all Shakespeare's women (save Miranda, perhaps, and really equal to her), Desdemona talks to the Senate about living with Othello, and afterward gayly declares she will make his bed a school. Everything being refined and ennobled with her, she thinks it so with others, and feels no need to check or guard her speech. She goes to such an excess in her innocence that the grave signiors must have been amused. Had they taken her literally they must have believed in the foul arts. But they knew it was the innocent and spiritualized heart

that revealed itself so freely. Nevertheless, it was incumbent on Othello to show that he did not intend to take advantage of the absolute and unlimited devotion of his fair bride in going with him to the war.

“ Let her have your voices.  
 Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not,  
 To please the palate of my appetite,\*  
 Nor to comply with heat—the young affects  
 In me defunct—and proper satisfaction,  
 But to be free and bounteous to her mind :  
 And heaven defend your good souls, that you think  
 I will your serious and great business scant  
 For she is with me : no, when light-wing’d toys  
 Of feather’d Cupid seal with wanton dullness  
 My speculative and officed instruments,  
 That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
 Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
 And all indign and base adversities  
 Make head against my estimation !”

\* Johnson paraphrases these lines with this not untruthful, but weak, washed-out circumlocution : “ I ask it not to please appetite or satisfy loose desires, the passions of youth which I have outlived, or for any particular gratification of myself, but merely that I may indulge the wishes of my wife.”

Hudson offers this paraphrase of the latter disputed clause: “ Nor to indulge the passions of youth (which in me have become extinct) and procure my own personal satisfaction.” He cites also the following from Massinger’s “ Bondman ” as making it all but certain this was the interpretation accepted in Shakespeare’s time :

“ Let me wear  
 Your colors, lady; and though *youthful heats*  
 That look no further than your outward form  
 Are long since *buried in me*: while I live  
 I am a constant lover of your mind.”

This speech is one of unending difficulty to the editors of Shakespeare. Those who, like Malone and White, take the language for what it says, are nevertheless sorely puzzled why, on his wedding day, Othello should utterly disclaim all impulses of sex, while others insist on recasting the passage in order to give it the more reasonable meaning which they think it greatly needs. In my view of the play this speech falls into line as a most important and significant one, to be read in its plain literal meaning and as presenting no difficulty in sense and no serious one in language.

The true meaning of the passage is: I ask it not for pleasure of appetite (the young affects or excesses of passion being now in me defunct), nor yet to supply the heat and proper satisfaction of impulse at my time of life, but only to feed bounteously and freely the affections and longings of Desdemona's mind.

The only material change in this construction is to throw the break in Othello's thought back half a measure, causing the lines which declare the young affects to be defunct to give the reason why the excessive desires of mere appetite are under control or subjugation. Shakespeare did not follow this collocation: the requirement of meter was in the way; he was intent on the bounding looseness of an ardent impulsive speech, and his audiences did not require the Dutch method of labeling the picture. If he had written for an audience of the present time, and had to depend on logical directness rather than on the



denotements of hymeneal poetry and the wonderrous possibilities of a blackamoor hero, he would doubtless have Othello tell us in closer sequence of the passing of youthful ardor as a sufficient reason for a thorough control of sexual desire in middle life, but hardly for an absolute renunciation of the satisfaction appropriate and proper at such an age. Yet Othello plainly declares to the Elizabethans a repudiation of all desire, even that which he thinks proper ordinarily to one of his age. The absence of "young affects" explains why he is superior to excesses of passion: as to why he rises above the measure of desire allowable at his time of life he offers a vastly higher, better reason—the glorious duty of being free and bounteous to Desdemona's mind. Brought by my theory of the play to this construction of this speech, I cannot but regard it as a sad error in such interpreters as Johnson and Hudson to think the noble Moor would ground his promise of just treatment of his heavenly Desdemona on the flagging or fading of the baser impulse in himself. Never could he bring himself to do that. The abrupt, purposely misplaced break in his language and thought is nobly significant. As he starts out in his appeal to the senators he offers the moderation of years as one reason why they may credit him,—tenders it for what it is worth as explaining his extraordinary position,—but is swept impulsively by the ardor and loftiness of his spirit into an absolute disclaimer even of such "proper satis-

faction " \* as might be thought rightful in a man of his years, vowing that he desired Desdemona for no selfish or sensuous purpose whatever, but solely for the exalted one of being free and bounteous to her exalted mind.

It is a narrow, unworthy criticism which regards Othello as disavowing sensuous desire for Desdemona only for the reason and to the extent that advancing years may aid him in moderation. Those who incline naturally to that view, and who are disposed also to think the Moor might be free and bounteous to Desdemona's mind while carrying her into the consummation of such a marriage as this, may as well forego all hope of understanding this play, and content themselves with the dry bones so long offered them by literalist commentators whose imaginations are dead within them. It is true Othello speaks of the impulse of sex as ungovernable in men when young affects or youthful desires hold sway, and as one which in middle life, when the early fever is abated, should be held down to a reasonable or proper satisfaction; but he—a man of perhaps forty-five—absolutely renounces even that. Such is the only consistent interpretation of his language, the only possible conduct

\* Miranda, in the "Knight of Malta" pledges "a chaste life" and "not to enjoy anything proper to myself." Gomera, an older man than Othello, says he will not fare like other husbands or resume "the order and habits that to men are necessary." Voletto calls this willful murder; but Gomera believed his wife dead, and was contemplating a widower's abstinence.

squaring with his situation and his character as a lofty Moor vested with the love of a tender, innocent, love-blinded Venetian maid—not simply moderation, but absolute denial; the chivalrous courtesy and reserve that should enable him to retain undimmed the reverential affection of the devoted bride who mistakenly pressed forward in her innocence and devotion to consummate her color-crossed marriage, but never could have accomplished it without ruin to her delicacy. It was for the glorious Othello to save her from herself.

That the noble Moor, from his standpoint, could be free and bounteous to the pure and delicate mind of Desdemona while inflicting an abuse upon her innocence and exposing her to a wrong maternity is a proposition in itself contradictory and absurd. Such action might fit dramatically the foul and wicked Aaron, might in such a case have true dramatic force however abhorrent morally, but in Othello it would be an utter falsity and would ruin the outlines of a noble character, and yet, the marriage being lawful, would fail of dramatic diabolism. It cannot be. Nor is it within reason to believe that Othello could intend the senators to understand that he pledged himself merely to be temperate and moderate in a legalized life of amalgamation—a hateful thing suggestive of danger and demoralization when indulged to any extent, even the slightest—and yet thought it necessary to declare himself solemnly against any light-winged toys of feathered Cupid, which at most could be objected to only as tending perhaps in the direction

of the amorous. Rejecting and disclaiming such trifles while admitting actual wrong—incredible! Nor can we believe Shakespeare would have permitted Iago's foul characterization of the marriage if he expected to put in contrast only a modified, washed-out, reduced example of the sort, or indeed anything less than a complete and glorious recoil.

Desdemona strangely broke in once before upon Othello's declarations to the Senate with a seeming contradiction, and now she does it again, but in both instances the effect is to demonstrate at once the devotion of her love and her surpassing innocence. She has not the slightest comprehension of the real ground of objection to her marriage; does not perceive that the senators have been gravely considering the danger of the commanding General being lost in the transports of base passion with her and of the loss of her ideals in gross disenchantment. Having no such thought herself she does not suspect it in others. She has no conception of the reason Othello has for being so ready to leave her behind and go to the war at once. So, in her artless innocence, she breaks in with avowals which contradict all that Othello had claimed. Artlessly innocent, and not realizing how race contrast made this marriage a thing apart, Desdemona had spoken of going with the Moor to "live with him," and she now protests against separation as if there could be no objection to the marriage being carried to fruition and it could be glorified by love like any other. The senators know no conscious woman could speak in that manner, and



Desdemona's charming candor in talking of life with Othello and separation from him precisely as if he were white is a complete refutation of the charges against the Moor of influencing her by foul arts and proof that he really desires her, not to "please the palate of appetite," but to "be free and bounteous to her mind." Most fitting was it that protests against separation should come from innocent, artless Desdemona, while Othello should show only eagerness to depart.

After Desdemona breaks in upon his argument and his promises in this manner, Othello conformed his plan to hers so far as to grant her request to go to the war, but not without making a most solemn pledge to the senators that if Desdemona went with him no disports with her should interfere with his performance of soldierly duty. He uses extraordinary emphasis here and calls Heaven to witness the truth of his declaration. Not content to rest the entire matter on his promise, he argues that his age and the subsidence of youthful passion make it possible for him to execute and maintain his pledge as a younger man might not be able to do. We can see the amused, half-suppressed smile on the faces of the senators at the unconscious innocence of Desdemona, as well as the expression of their confidence that Othello would ever keep her as she was—a "maiden wife." Only when so satisfied would they have consented that the daughter of a brother senator should be taken to the front with the Moor. To no men could intermarriage be more hideous on general

principles, and especially as concerning a woman in their own circle and a General whom they had intrusted with a critical command. The critics have sadly failed to see why this speech should stand with its plain simple meaning unobscured and unmodified. There was abundant reason in Othello's case why he should make just the avowal he did upon his wedding day; and it is equally clear Desdemona's speeches, instead of being excised for indelicacy, should be carefully retained as evidences of the purity and artless innocence of her nature.

Unchecked and unadmonished by the plain terms of Othello's speech, which she evidently did not or could not fully understand, Desdemona failed to perceive there was any reason or motive of modesty even to guard her speech; hence she bursts into the protest "To-night, my lord!"—an exclamation so extreme in maidenly innocence that the critics have thought it crosses the line where extremes meet, and careful editors have dutifully excised it as an indelicate protest against delaying the consummation of her marriage. The speeches which above all others attest the superlative innocence of Desdemona generally excised as indelicate!

Realizing that any affection between the Moor and a Venetian woman must be

"Ne'er settled equally, but high or low,"

Othello's approved good masters must have felt well satisfied before they gave him command and allowed Desdemona to go with him. Appreciating the vindication won from the Senate, Othello, an

experienced general, knowing the dangers of military rivalries and intrigues, of disputed conduct and unprovable defenses or assertions, would naturally desire to guard himself as best he could with evidence to show in the future he was worthy such confidence. Mark how he does it. Accepting the order to depart at once for Cyprus, he immediately announces his decision that Desdemona shall follow in a separate ship.

“So please your grace, my ancient;

A man he is of honesty and trust:

To his conveyance I assign my wife,

With what else needful your good grace shall think

To be sent after me.”

Careful not to leave Othello alone with Desdemona an hour after the marriage, the dramatist first showed him in the street with Iago, then called him quickly to the Senate, and is now hurrying him off to sea with nuptials uncelebrated. Mark too the device of separate ships, a complete reversal of Cinthio, where Othello and Desdemona sail on the same vessel. Such are the preparations for the full disclosure of non-marital relations to come later on.

But Othello does not stop with arrangements for Desdemona to come after in another vessel. He selects Emilia to be a companion to her in the life to which she is proceeding.

“Honest Iago,

My Desdemona must I leave to thee:

I prithee, let thy wife attend on her:

And bring them after in the best advantage.”

About the last thing to be expected of Othello, this man of broils and battles, would be to select a maid for Desdemona. She could surely do that better herself. But Emilia is not a mere waiting-woman. Her husband is an officer of considerable rank—one who had aspired to be lieutenant to the General; and his wife would hardly take the position of a mere servant. Desdemona might have had other attendants of her own selection; the one chosen by Othello was intended, while having the intimacy and close association of a maid, to be a companion as well.

Reputation meant much to Othello. The Duke declared Montano a competent commander, but that popular opinion, "a sovereign mistress of effects," preferred Othello as a safer man. Evidently the Moor could no more afford the loss of public confidence himself than he could endure the suspicion of putting a stain upon his bride.

The scene before the Senate has never received adequate analysis. Brabantio naturally thought his brothers in that body would punish the abductor of his daughter with special severity, as the wrong was against one of their own number. The Duke promptly declared that the villain who had stolen Desdemona should receive the letter of the law, even though it were his own son. Naturally the personal indignation of the senators should have waxed still warmer when they found the offender was Othello—a man who had received great favor from the Senate and now appeared before it in the light of an ingrate. Instead, however, at the men-



tion of Othello injured senatorial pride is forgotten and the reverend signiors display only profound regret, exclaiming with one voice:

“We are very sorry for 't.”

This is a sudden change, but one Shakespeare intended to be emphatic. Properly rendered on the stage, this simultaneous outburst of the assembled consuls is one of the impressive features of the play. What is the meaning of this unexpected and striking turn? “We are very sorry for 't.” That sudden involuntary exclamation from the entire Senate was not prompted by mere personal concern for Othello, but meant that the senators had taken alarm lest circumstances were suddenly proving him not a fit man for the defense of Cyprus, which was the emergency then weighing heavily upon them to the exclusion of private and individual affairs. If a man of Othello's high personal and professional character, of his elevated sense of honor, professed faith as a Christian, and previous noble self-control had suddenly descended to foul and licentious abuse of a senator's daughter, it would seem almost inevitable that he was so changed, demoralized, and degraded as to be unfit for military trust at a critical time.

It was not the love potions that made the senators cry out together in anxiety. Charges of that kind against capable soldiers who were urgently needed for the defense of Cyprus would be quickly whistled down the wind. Imagine the Senate detaining Cassio for instance on such a charge at such a time.

Why then was it different with Othello? Simply because his age, race, and established reputation were such that no one could think of him as a practitioner of unwarranted arts without dark suspicions of the utter demoralization of the whole man. The senators must have thought then, as Lodovico said later:

“Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate  
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature  
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue  
The shot of accident nor dart of chance  
Could neither graze nor pierce?”

It was no charge of love potions that troubled the Senate. To suppose, as it has been so long supposed, that the Senate, at a time of public danger, was engaged in trying its ablest General on a charge of love philters is absurd to a degree. Shakespeare is not responsible for such occultation. The real question troubling the Senate was that of Othello's fitness to command, although—fortunately for dramatic effect—the poet is able to keep that momentous affair of state interlaced with the softer, more affecting charge of wrong to Desdemona, so that in investigating and deciding the one, the Senate necessarily investigates and decides the other. In other soldiers' loves, powders and even plainer wrongs might be passed as not affecting military efficiency. But with “the noble Moor” it was altogether different. With him the charge suggested such change and demoralization—such a fall from previous high repute—as to make him unfit for command. Professionally unfit. He him-

self did not assume or ask that conduct in any degree like that winked at in his lieutenant should be excused in him. Rather did he think in his case love potions and lechery would deserve not only removal from command, but death.

“ If you do find me foul in her report,  
The trust, the office, I do hold of you,  
Not only take away, but let your sentence  
Even fall upon my life.”

The Senate had reason for anxiety. On its face the marriage, if legally regular, was naturally wrong, unworthy the Othello “that wert once so good.” In Shakespeare’s time, even more generally than now, was it believed beautiful white women could excite the most destructive and demoralizing desires in black men. Never could the Senate place faith in a commanding general like Othello—a Moor—lost in the early transports of a *mésalliance* with a fair Venetian. The liaisons it winked at were those safely inside lines of race. What was feared with Othello was the uncontrolled and uncontrollable passion of a black warrior fallen from high self-control and freshly involved with a woman of superior race. Yet the Senate could trust Othello if the black captain had not sunk to base passion, but, with a heart chivalrous and knightly as ever, had entered wedlock only to make an idealized white bride the goddess of his idolatry. The issue was an anxious one. The test question was propounded to Othello when he was asked whether his relations with Desdemona took

their rise in improperly excited passion or were such as "soul to soul affordeth." Othello's solemn appeals to Heaven show how grave he thought the question. Rude in speech, he rose now to noble eloquence. The senators looked into Othello's brave, manly face; they listened with delight to his wondrous story, and on their souls they could not doubt his lofty tale. Convinced by Othello's ideal story of an ideal love, the Duke exclaimed:

"I think this tale would win my daughter too."

And the Duke hastens to assure Brabantio his son-in-law, tested by the heart and the mind, "is far more fair than black." "Adieu, brave Moor! use Desdemona well" is another hearty expression of confidence and admiration. Othello's vindication is complete. He retains his command, and he not only gets Desdemona, but has permission to take her with him to the war.

Othello realized after his vindication by the Senate that he was in a position not only to display the quality of his discipline and self-restraint toward Desdemona, but to fortify himself by having competent proof of his conduct at command. Brabantio had predicted that, in consequence of her marriage to Othello, Desdemona would become "a general mock"—something most agonizing to the high-souled Moor, keenly alive both to the realities and the appearances of honor. To guard and save his angel was not enough: the noble truth must be apparent to the world. In no way could he make such proof better than to have a female companion



in such close and constant attendance on Desdemona that she could of her own knowledge refute any suspicion of marital intimacy, to say nothing of the coarse excesses predicted of him as "a lascivious Moor." In no other way could he so well save Desdemona from Brabantio's prediction as by demonstrating his "perfect soul"; that is, by proving his love for Desdemona purely and perfectly that of the soul, without a trace of desire for her body. Precisely such a love does Othello assert his to be. Before the nuptial night, before there was a chance of physical completion, he speaks of his love having reached the highest possible point of gratification—almost "too much of joy," and with nothing further to be imagined.

"My soul hath her content so absolute,  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate."

If it be thought, in dwelling on Othello's fear that his interracial marriage might cost Desdemona loss of social esteem, as also in emphasizing the precautions he took to provide proof of his real relations with her, that I have overlaid a few brief speeches with an excess of comment and conclusion, the explanation is simple. Shakespeare's plays were intended for the stage,—to have the meaning developed through the actor's art,—and the reader who depends on the unaided text will often fall far short of the meaning. The actor can make much in a moment of a few lines which the commentator may need pages to explain. A capable actor, preserving

Othello's grand dignity, would show by attitude and action how he recoiled from the foul charges of Brabantio. Later, by action when the Duke spoke of popular confidence in him, he would display Othello's solicitude for good report. So by appropriate action, re-enforcing the ever-visible problem of the black face, he would make us see that in appointing Emilia as waiting-woman he intended to provide the witness and the proof to save Desdemona from social mock or fleer as a woman debased in unnatural marriage. These strokes could be quickly executed on the stage, but a commentator must slowly educe them. So it is with the fundamental idea of this play—race difference. On the stage the contrast of the black husband and white wife is painfully clear up to the last, but the reader is apt to lose sight of it, and frequent reminders may be needed to give it due importance. That Shakespeare wrote for the stage, not for readers, is the source of many of the worst perversions he has suffered from editors who cling too exclusively to the text.

Othello's care met with marked success. Quite soon indeed did his perfect soul-love begin to "manifest him rightly." While Brabantio believed Desdemona would become a subject of general odium immediately after her marriage, we see the contrary opinion taking root as the true nature of the union is developed by the voluntary separation of the pair on the trip and by Emilia's constant attendance. This is strikingly shown in the conduct of Cassio. A decided type of the gay Lothario,

he greets Desdemona on her arrival at Cyprus with profound reverence:

“ Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,  
Before, behind thee, and on every hand,  
Enwheel thee 'round!”

As if to emphasize by contrast his deep respect for Desdemona, Cassio, bold gallant that he is, turns at once to Emilia, and with characteristic assurance greets her by kissing her. Yet it has been assumed that this seasoned man of the world and soldier displays deep veneration for Desdemona as a woman guilty of miscegenation! Never would he do that. Only stainless delicacy and purity could command his respect. The marriage compels Cassio's reverence from the first; there was danger, indeed, that his attitude should lull the playgoer into a perfect confidence that all was well with Desdemona and destroy a desirable dramatic suspense. Hence two countervailing strokes are thrown in here to arouse anxiety and renew in us some uncertainty and agitation—the nuptial celebration and the morning serenade. Both these events would be caught at once in the days of the old nuptial poetry and bridal customs; but the intelligent Elizabethan spectator saw they were peculiarly clouded in this instance, and his curiosity and interest were highly excited.

Othello had declared his non-hymeneal purpose; and his avowal of desiring Desdemona only for the mental or spiritual intimacies of marriage seemed confirmed by his absence from her at

midnight on the night of the wedding, followed by the immediate separation and journey to Cyprus in separate ships. There would remain a strong-doubt whether the Moor could keep his pledge after Desdemona rejoined him and he was released from the strain of war. Moreover, it was clear from Desdemona's wonderfully open and candid declaration of marrying the Moor to live with him that she expected the marriage to take the usual course, believing in her simplicity it could do so, without injury to her delicacy, and as an expression of wifely devotion and consecration, precisely as if Othello were white. This disposition on her part, together with the arrival of the end of the war and the announcement of the general revelry and the nuptial celebration, imply that the Moor is soon to be put to a severe test. Othello gave the order for the jubilee over the return of peace, but it seems not that for the nuptial celebration, which, it may be, the herald included in the announcement of his own motion. Thus the nuptial observance does not stand by itself or as a chief event, but, contrary to custom, is made a mere incident of another and larger celebration, and that, too, without any express direction from Othello. So, too, the serenade which follows next morning may or may not have the full significance of the dawn-song. It is led by Cassio, and we can hardly conceive of him celebrating an actual malodorous marriage of black and white in this way, especially as he had persistently regarded the union only from the poetic side theretofore. Still, enough is thrown in to arouse solici-



tude for Desdemona and keep the underplot moving.

As Othello is ordering the guard posted for the night, that joy may not outsport discretion, there occurs the speech which, suffering more than any other from expurgation and misinterpretation, has involved the general plot:

"Michael, good-night: to-morrow with your earliest  
Let me have speech with you. [*To Des.*] Come, my  
dear love,  
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;  
That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.  
Good-night."

Does this good-night speech—generally excised as an indelicate forecast of immediate consummation—really warrant the conclusion that Othello's lofty purposes and pledges are abandoned without an attempt to keep them? Does the dramatist intend at this early stage in the weaving of his plot to sully irretrievably the delicacy of Desdemona and destroy our suspense over her fate in marriage—a suspense that could be kept in telling dramatic agitation to the close—together with a glorious opportunity to transform gradually a base thing into one of grandeur? Never can such blundering be proved against Shakespeare.

To the old playgoer, comprehending Othello's promise that his marriage was not intended for consummation, the pausing of the Moor at the door of the nuptial chamber must have been a nervous moment. But Othello himself reassured him, and

with a quick Shakespearean stroke transformed anxiety into relief and hope.

“ Before the curing of a strong disease,  
Even in the instant of repair and health,  
The fit is strongest.”

So with a suddenness we feel but hardly can understand we are made to perceive that when Othello spoke of the rightfulness and fitness of a consummation on the nuptial night, he was not casting about, as we feared, for some palliating excuse for himself; he was instead generously and considerately conceding to Desdemona that her modest desire to consecrate herself in marriage was right in spirit and motive, even though to be denied for other reasons. We must never forget that this play was written at a time when the epithalamium of the Greeks and Latins was in the first flush of its early and transient popularity in English verse, and coexisted with certain daring old British customs pertaining to the bridal occasion. Audiences of that time were quick to perceive nuptial allusions or suggestions where those of later times see nothing of the kind. It needs, however, no knowledge of the old hymeneal poetry or custom to catch the meaning of arrested marriage in such bridal scenes as those in the “Albovine” of Sir William Davenant or in the “Maid’s Tragedy” of Beaumont and Fletcher; not until we come to Shakespeare do we find the colors so delicate that time has obscured them, and the light of the hymenean of the Elizabethans

must be revived to perceive the significance of a seemingly slight deflection in a nuptial celebration. In "Romeo and Juliet" Shakespeare uses epithalamic suggestion with more directness than in the "Othello," and it may be well to compare his work there with the suggestions which lay before him in the sources of his plot and also with the strongly contrasting scene of Othello's nuptials.

After the long-drawn-out description of the raptures of Romeo and Juliet, Brooke, in the early poem, conducts them to the bridal chamber and indicates the culmination of the marriage with a directness quite unnecessary, but with a detail which discloses the prevailing view of wedlock as accomplished by nature's rite, not by a form or ceremony. Shakespeare offers the same teaching, but expresses it with greater delicacy. He does not take us to the nuptial chamber; he intimates his meaning in the coarse clatter of the nurse, reddening Juliet's cheeks, and in the young wife's invocation to the night as she sings her own epithalamium. The second balcony scene is a more specific yet more delicate stroke borrowed from the dawn-song of hymeneal poetry.

Audiences familiar with nuptial poetry knew it was not the troth-plight bride, not the formally wedded one merely, but the actual wife who tried to hear the lark and not the nightingale at dawn; they felt the full sorrow in the sundering of the perfected union of husband and wife. Some modern readers have missed this in "Romeo and Juliet" because of the delicacy of the suggestion, but in

the "Othello," where the coloring is more delicate still and the indication is of arrested, and not completed, marriage, the beautiful implication has remained unseen by all since the passing of the old hymeneal poetry. But the true meaning of the nuptial strokes is far more needful to a proper understanding of the "Othello" than of the earlier tragedy. The necessary assumption is natural and easy with "Romeo and Juliet," but the integrity of the "Othello" demands that we shall not be left to supposition, but be supplied with some more positive evidence of the black-white marriage not being by nature's rite "thus consummate," and yet art calls for delicate, almost faint, portrayal.

The common interpretation of the play, logically carried out, is ruinous. Aspersing Desdemona later as a woman of unnatural and ungovernably base impulses, Iago offers an accusation which necessarily points back to this occasion of the nuptial celebration. He appeals to something which Othello as an actual husband knows to be either true or untrue. If the latter he would of course resent it and reject the suspicion resting upon it, but as, unhappily, he succumbs quickly his conduct implies, in the common theory, that his knowledge of Desdemona's nature caused her guilt with Cassio to appear altogether probable. There can then be no question of her relations with the Moor, and the play sinks to the disgusting. For otherwise, if we see that when Iago whispered his slander of Desdemona both he and Othello were thinking of a deflected nuptial celebration and of a marriage



yet unconsummated between the Moor and his bride, then the artifice of Iago in reconciling the alleged ungovernable impulses of Desdemona with her actual conduct is a marvel of duplicity, and the deception of the Moor in respect to the cause of her abstention with him is tragically piteous, not contemptibly weak.

"That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you. Good-night." \*

This speech of the Moor is pregnant with vital and even contrasted meaning. With the singular fatality which distinguishes the pair of never exactly understanding each other, Desdemona takes this language the reverse of the Moor's intent. "Yet to come" is an expression which may be used in a way implying soon to come or never to come—complete opposites. To Desdemona it meant simply a postponement which, however contrary to the meaning of the nuptial celebration as understood at that time by even the most modest of brides, was one for which she must have thought Othello had sufficient reason. It did not suggest to her that she was never to be a wife fully devoted to her husband: she simply put in abeyance the wedding sheets taken with her when she eloped.

Shakespeare's first audiences took Othello differently from Desdemona. They knew he had rightly proposed a permanent arrest of the marriage, but

\*The contradictions in the early texts as to the exits here are best solved by supposing the pair passed off simultaneously but severally, visibly indicating the separation for the night.

their difficulty was as to how such a life could be maintained through months and years under the peculiar conditions here prevailing, and with Desdemona certain to oppose it in time, prompted by that characteristically feminine, yet in this instance mistaken, spirit which could not stop short of a complete consecration of herself to her husband. For this ill-fated pair the epithalamic stroke of the nuptial night is sounded in a double key.

From the moment of Othello's speech of renunciation at the door of the nuptial chamber the hymeneal underplot, which revolves about the fate of Desdemona in marriage, moves on with redoubled force.

We must read Othello's second good-night as addressed to Desdemona; not, as has been wrongly thought, a reiterated adieu to Cassio, to whom he had already bade farewell for the night. Nor must we fail to notice certain subordinate touches: the splendid self-mastery at the opening, when the Moor gives the caution for the white nobles and officers "not to outsport discretion"; the preoccupation of Othello's mind as he fixes the early appointment of the morning, when he is to have papers ready for transmission which are not ready yet and which may require the labor of the night for completion. Correctly enacted on the stage, however, the culminating stroke of this scene should appear in an incident not embodied in the lines—the parting of Othello and Desdemona as they make exit by different doors to their respective chambers, from which they come by the same re-

spective entrances later when aroused by the night brawl, thus doubly attesting their separation on the nuptial night. Elizabethan audiences knew well enough Iago was lying, as usual, when he spoke of the night being made wanton with Desdemona; yet their interest was powerfully stimulated to see how the Moor could maintain his high purpose, opposed as it must be ultimately by Desdemona herself. For it was she who in her pure idealism and erring devotion was the worst enemy of his high and glorious resolve.\*

Turning from the parties to the marriage to the side characters, we find the beautiful truth of the union reflected by them according to their capacity to perceive and appreciate it. As is so often the case, we have to seek the truth in the precise opposite of Iago's groveling slanders; while the reverence of the gallant Cassio for the union is proof against debasing insinuation and such as he could never have felt for the

\* Othello's good-night speech is the only one which by any sort of interpretation can be regarded as an expression of base impulse, but the critics have all accepted it as such. Professor Young only expresses the general opinion when he says the love of Desdemona is "beautifully pure and ideal," but, with this passage evidently in mind, he adds that in Othello "not so much of the beast had been worked out." But surely Shakespeare has never asked us to believe he could preserve a beautiful and ideal affection in a white woman while making her the marital companion of a black man in whom the beast had not been worked out. Such companionship would be fatal to her delicacy and ideality. It is a hopeless inconsistency to

base alliance of black and white which Iago tried to picture to him. This significant contrast in the two men is shown in a passage too generally expurgated or diluted by the editors. It must be read in full for these reasons, and because, further, it pallisades us effectually against Snider's ruinous doctrine of the play being intended primarily to teach that the Moor's alleged knowledge of impurity in Emilia inclined him to suspect it quickly in Desdemona. Knowing only too much of laxity in women, Cassio has nevertheless profoundest reverence for Desdemona, and his high-born faith had been confirmed to eye and ear when he caught the meaning of the good-night speech and saw the pair make exit severally. Iago could never poison him!

*Iago.* Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame; he hath not yet made wanton the night with her; and she is sport for Jove.

*Cas.* She's a most exquisite lady.

think we can save Desdemona as an angel of feminine grace (as she truly is) and have her live in wedlock with a man of alien race and color in whom the beast still survives. If we are capable of believing such a thing, Shakespeare will not ask it of us. The conventional view of the relations between Othello and Desdemona is its own best refutation; if not, it would surely be the dramatist's eternal condemnation that he should make Desdemona the most ideally refined of all his women save Miranda—with a delicacy so inwrought as to cause the verse forms of her speech to be profuse in the feminine *cæsura*—and then surrender her to a man of barbaresque blood and color in whom the beast still survives. It cannot be.



*Iago.* And, I'll warrant her, full of game.

*Cas.* Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.

*Iago.* What an eye she has ! methinks it sounds a parley of provocation.

*Cas.* An inviting eye ; and yet methinks right modest.

*Iago.* And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

*Cas.* She is indeed perfection.

When, later in the night, Othello was aroused by the street brawl, he came from his apartment accompanied only by his attendant, appearing upon the scene almost on the instant of the uproar in the street. He must have been awake and clad when the disturbance broke out. Desdemona does not appear for some time later—not indeed until the brawl has been quieted and an examination into the affair has been made by Othello. She was aroused by the same clamor which brought Othello on the scene in a twinkling, but, as she had to delay to dress, the swordsmen were parted and quiet restored before she appeared. Othello came instantly from the room where he was at work with his papers; Desdemona from her bed after the delay of dressing.

“ Look, if my gentle love be not raised up ! ”

is Othello's exclamation of surprise breaking into his speech to Cassio when she appears—coming by another entrance and from a different apartment from the Moor. This is his first knowledge that Desdemona too was aroused by the uproar. The stage direction does not say who came with Desdemona as she hurried in alarm from her chamber to seek Othello, but gives simply this: “ Re-enter Des-

demonia, attended." But by whom should she be attended unless by her regular attendant? That was Emilia. In the early morning scene of the third act Cassio asks if "the gentlewoman that attends the general's wife be stirring," meaning Emilia. So Othello in the third scene of the fourth act, near the end of the play, directs Desdemona to go to bed, and "dismiss your attendant," which admonition Desdemona immediately obeys, explaining to the astonished Emilia that she must leave her that night—must absent herself as she had not done before—because it is Othello's express command. Emilia, up to the night of the murder, was the regular nightly attendant of Desdemona, and was with her in her chamber on the nuptial night as on other nights, as Othello intended she should be from the first.

Emilia does not seem to pass any time with her husband, day or night, during the period of the dramatic action, and he understands she is constantly with Desdemona. Hence his anger when he discovers her alone in the garden and away from Desdemona, though but for a moment and in the daytime. Iago speaks of passing the night with Cassio on one occasion in particular, and we may suppose they were room-mates for a time while his wife was absent, for he has easy admission to the same lodging Cassio occupied, and can go there even in Cassio's absence, as he does when he drops the handkerchief. But whether that be so or not it is clear Emilia is executing the function for which she was selected by Othello to help vindicate his

"perfect soul" by being a constant companion to Desdemona, and being able if need be to give testimony to sustain the ground he took before the signiory of wanting Desdemona alone for the mind's sake and the heart's sake, refuting Brabantio's charge of desiring her for the indulgence of an unnatural alliance.

This night brawl provoked Othello's indignation in a singular and excessive degree. It occurred on a night set apart for revelry, and it seems strange at first Othello should think it so heinous. It began, however, under his window, and might suggest general revelry and license emanating near the source of authority at Cyprus—possibly that "disports of feathered Cupid" were diverting the General's oversight from his subordinates much as he had feared the senators would apprehend. At any rate, public confidence being so important to Othello, he was extremely anxious to quiet the disorder and get people back to their beds with as little disturbance as possible. He turns from one to another urging them all to retire, and says he will go with Montano to act as his surgeon. Montano is led off, but Othello pauses to summon again Desdemona, whose enlivened curiosity prompts her to linger.

*Oth.* All's well now, sweeting; come, away to bed.  
Sir, for your hurts, myself will be your surgeon;  
Lead him off. [*To Montano, who is led off.*]  
Iago, look with care about the town,  
And silence those whom this vile brawl distracted.  
Come, Desdemona: 'tis the soldiers' life  
To have their balmy slumbers waked with strife.

"Come, away to bed," like "Lead him off," "Come, Desdemona," and the order to Iago, implies merely Othello's desire to restore quiet and get all the people back to their beds, not that Desdemona was to go with him. Othello does not retire with Desdemona, but goes to dress Montano's wounds, while she returns to her chamber with Emilia. "All's well now, sweeting," with the quick directions to others to do what is needed to restore quiet, and his preparation to care for the wounded man, show Othello recovered from the strangely violent agitation; the strong habitual self-control of the natural leader and commander, temporarily lost because of the unseen strain of anxiety wearing upon him, is now brought back by the stimulus of the night brawl acting upon and restoring the powerful will.

Shakespeare might have followed Othello through the rest of the night with all the detail a veritist could ask. But in his art something is left to imagination, and he does not intend we should feel absolutely sure of Desdemona until the last act. For all dramatic purposes Othello is sufficiently accounted for that night. Will anyone say it is not made sufficiently plain by daybreak—as much so as dramatic suspense will permit—what was Othello's purpose when he bade Cassio good-night and set the appointment with him for the earliest hour in the morning? We find when morning comes Othello has ready for his lieutenant certain letters and military reports to be dispatched to Venice. These reports contained the joyous



news of the end of the war—intelligence that would be written and sent as soon as possible. Othello would not have slept before writing these reports, nor would he allow the vessel to delay sailing after they were written. They were not ready at bedtime; they were ready at daybreak. Othello had spent the night writing them, his task being interrupted by the street brawl and the dressing of Montano's wounds. Next day Desdemona accounts for the headache Othello suffers by saying it is the result of lack of sleep. His reports were doubtless elaborate, and, with many private letters, would occupy all the time until the early summer dawn. It is inconceivable that Shakespeare, with nuptial nights bearing the significance they did in his time, would treat a bridegroom in this way if it were not for a special purpose and special emphasis.

This last scene of the nuptial night produces a remarkable affect on Iago. We recall his coarse vulgarity early the same night. But after Emilia and Desdemona retire together and Othello goes to attend Montano there is a complete, immediate change in Iago. This same man who early in the watch talked vilely to Cassio now before day has broken holds a different language. Before, he believed Othello actuated by a coarse desire for Desdemona; now he says the Moor has given himself up, not to indulgence, but to "the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces." Strange Iago should credit anything so platonic. He says "our General's wife is now the General," echoing the language of the reverential Cassio,

who, in picturing her high-minded sway, declared Desdemona "our great captain's captain." The idea is that of worship, distant adoration, not marital love. Iago continues:

"And then for her  
To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,  
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,  
His soul is so enfetter'd to her love,  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetite shall play the god  
With his weak function."

Iago does not mean that Desdemona has acquired great influence through marital endearment. In his view she may "do what she list," deny Othello to any extent, and, whether he like it or not, rule him as a god. Heathen by birth, baptism was no form, but profound reality, to Othello. To renounce it and obey not as a responding lover, but as if Desdemona were a god—such superlative comparisons demonstrate Iago's belief that Othello's affection has reached the plane of a soul love—almost religious veneration. Of all men Iago now believes such a love possible. Iago's skeptical mind was not convinced by the voyage in separate ships, and he seems to have had no respect for Othello's declarations before the Senate. Now, however, his impressions rest on the part his own wife is taking as constant companion, and before dawn of the very night which he said was to be made wanton he confesses to himself a miracle has been wrought with the Moor. Disbelieving every high profession before, he is satisfied now.

Just before the nuptial celebration Iago declares his plan to be even'd with Othello "wife for wife": only in case that failed would he try to throw the Moor into a jealousy. Then came the disclosures of the bridal night, showing Iago the real relations of the pair, and we hear no more of attempts to corrupt Desdemona. The plan for approaching her is abandoned as no longer to be thought of, and the second scheme resorted to. But though convinced by what he has seen and heard that Desdemona is an unapproachable virgin wife, Iago at once proposes to make the very fact of her supreme innocence the instrument of her undoing. He will infuse into Othello the belief that she is easily abstinent with him because freely indulgent with Cassio.

Satanic in his determination to have perfect innocence get the punishment of lowest guilt, Iago completes his plot:

" . . . for whiles this honest fool  
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes,  
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,  
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,—  
That she repeals him for her body's lust;  
And by how much she strives to do him good  
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.  
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all."

The virtue and goodness of Desdemona, not only as the friend of Cassio, but as the platonic bride, are now to be ruined. Iago believed at first Desdemona must be animated by excessive passion and

desire for a husband of tropical African ardor, and the result would inevitably be satiety, disgust, loathing. After the disclosures of the nuptial night that idea is abandoned. Even Iago sees an angel where he thought there was a beast. It is his plan, however, to poison Othello with the suspicion that a white woman could not marry a black man unless urged on by unnatural passion. That suspicion will strike Othello at his weakest point,—touch his supersensitive feeling of racial inferiority and prompt the fear that he alone looks upward in marriage and has the “perfect soul,”—but how is it to be reconciled with Desdemona’s post-nuptial conduct? Clinging to the idea of unnatural passion in Desdemona as the one most certain to work and craze Othello, the subtle villain knows, from the events of the nuptial night, he must craftily qualify this general doctrine in its application to her. Had he not seen and understood the unplanned but deeply significant revelation of the nuptial night, he could not have done this with such consummate and cruel effect:

“ Ay, there’s the point: as—to be bold with you,  
Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends—  
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural,  
But pardon me; I do not in position  
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms  
And happily repent.”



What subtle, dreadful, fateful villainy is this! It is his inside knowledge through Emilia that enables him to work Othello so fearfully. He probes the inflamed nerve, declaring only extreme lust could prompt a white woman to refuse proper marriage with men of her own complexion in order to wed a black man; but, knowing Desdemona's abstinent conduct will not square with any charge of physical desire for Othello, he makes a momentary exception of her. "But I do not distinctly speak of her." Is she then to be exculpated from the general charge because of her abstention with Othello? Never. The inhuman dog intends to make her the worse for that. Marrying Othello with the base impulse of a hot-blooded, uncontrollable nature, she has yet fortunately "recoiled to her better judgment" and "happily repented" of intending marital endearment with a man of alien race. That is the explanation of her willing sexual abstention in respect to Othello, as it is also the unspoken but potent suggestion of her illicit and inevitable indulgence with a man of her own complexion. The ardor which caused her unnatural desire for a black man, which prompted her strange advances to Othello, and made her give the hint upon which he spoke, nevertheless could not prove equal to the last step in the contemplated wrong against nature. With poisonous insinuation Iago praises her for repenting and recoiling in time, thereby indirectly torturing Othello with added cruelty. Othello is not only left to reach the unavoidable conviction that in turning from him she has turned to a man

of her own race, but is compelled to discern for himself a conclusion still more bitter. Her guilt is more wanton than mere infidelity, in that she has not made him secondary where once he was first, not made him share with another, but actually lavished upon the other that which he could not have at any time or under any circumstances, husband though he was. And as he gladly accepted abstinence to save what was highest and holiest in his goddess, he now appears as a dupe without precedent, and a man who can no longer hold faith in humanity or heaven. Guilt base and wanton beyond any common adultery can be punished only by a wrath great and awful beyond any mere jealousy. Infusing such beliefs and arousing such awful wrath in Othello, this devil certainly did fulfill his promise to turn the very virtue and innocence of the wedded virgin into pitch.

“O curse of marriage,  
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,  
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,  
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon,  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
For others' uses. Yet, 'tis the plague of great ones;  
Prerogativèd are they less than the base;  
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.  
Even then this forked plague is fated to us  
When we do quicken.”

To call Desdemona his wife while Cassio has her appetite! Mark, that Othello does not speak of a use in common with another, but of that other having a distant corner set apart for himself alone. By

“great ones” Othello does not mean, as Iago did,—for he is always a foil to him, even in language,—mere men of wealth or distinguished position, but those who are great in the sense of taking a lofty view of love and placing it on a plane high above physical attractions or antagonisms. Yet in his anguish he now declares they who are great enough to do this are really less secure and less privileged than the base who do not try to keep affection above and beyond physical desire. Jaundiced with the idea that, although Desdemona shows not the slightest sexual desire toward him, she is yet a woman of passionate temperament and has a consuming passion for Cassio, Othello plunges into the pitiful divination of palmistry.

*Oth.* Give me your hand: this hand is moist, my lady.

*Des.* It yet hath felt no age nor known no sorrow.

*Oth.* This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart:

Hot, hot, and moist: this hand of yours requires

A sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer,

Much castigation, exercise devout;

For here's a young and sweating devil here,

That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,

A frank one.

What plain teaching this. Exulting and rejoicing in a soul love, keeping Emilia as a companion ever with the virgin wife, so if need be he can prove to the world her white virginity remains sacred in marriage, this once reverential bridegroom now suspects his absence from the nuptial chamber has been another's opportunity; that bride and companion have united to deceive him, and while he has

lived in a fool's paradise of lofty sentiment his angel has had her "stolen hours of lust." Yet when it comes to a test of these suspicions he has no better evidence than her hand by which to judge the strength of her passions!

After the suspicions excited by Iago were confirmed by the "sweating devil" of her hand, and by the supposed foul use she had made of his sacred token, and after the apparent open avowal Cassio made of criminal relations with Desdemona, there was nothing to shelter her from the unrestrained fury of Othello. She could hardly comprehend him when he found evidence of hot, uncontrollable passion in her hand, but as the language flowing from the crazed Othello's mind grew fouler and plainer there was no room for misunderstanding. At last she saw and realized that he was accusing her of relations toward another which she had never assumed with him. In her wretchedness she saw at last that Othello believed she had a nature so passionate it must have some outlet; if not with him, certainly with another. She saw, too, even when his love for her seemed ruined, that her bodily charms still influenced him, for he stopped short in a torrent of abuse to exclaim over her beauty:

"O thou weed,  
Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet,  
That the sense aches at thee."

Desdemona understood from this she still had one hold upon Othello, one possible means of reclaiming his love, and, though gentle and timid in



the extreme, her desperation made her act quickly. She had always believed, like Massinger's Cleora, that the love of a lowly man, if true, should not go unrewarded, but now she had an added motive. If because of abstention toward him she is accused of indulging her passionate nature with a more favored person, of lavishing upon Cassio attractions which her own husband had only admired at a distance, Othello must be made to see that there is no possible favor that will not be granted to him. Only so can she wipe that suspicion from his mind; only so can she give the virginal proof of innocence. Her resolution is quickly taken, and she turns to Emilia.

Prithee, to-night

Lay on my bed my wedding sheets; remember;  
And call thy husband hither.

*Emil.*

Here's a change indeed!

*Des.* 'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet.  
How have I been behaved, that he might stick  
The foul'st opinion on my greatest abuse? \*

Platonic relations are to be ended. The love of the "perfect soul"—that love which in Othello's hope was to remain so purely and perfectly of the soul that the body was to have no share in it—is wrecked. The wedding sheets are to be brought forth. And Emilia's astonishment at this turn of affairs appropriately finds expression—"Here's a change indeed!" Then after Emilia goes out

\* I follow the first quarto instead of the folio and nearly all modern editions, which have "least misuse."

comes Desdemona's brief soliloquy over the step she is about to take. "How have I been behaved!" It must be her unwifely sexual abstention is what has caused Othello to suspect her of sating desires with another—granting her favors to a more favored person. It is this error of omission, this her "greatest abuse," which has led and almost compelled Othello to form one of the foulest of opinions. There is but one remedy—to show Othello there is no possible favor that will not be granted to him.\*

Mournful it is to know that, as Desdemona directs her bed to be prepared for an appalling sacrifice, Othello has already determined to make that same bed a death scene.

\* It is plain that the term "small'st," as passed heretofore by all editors, is a misprint for "foul'st," as the substitution would be an easy one to make. I should warn youthful readers not familiar with the records of Shakespearean commentary that this change in the text is original, not previously advanced, and not authoritative. It remains to be seen whether the authorities will accept a view so contrary to what they have held. Desdemona's soliloquy, as they have explained it heretofore, is an absurdity. Clark, for instance, says the meaning is, "How can I have behaved, that even my least misconduct should have subjected me to the smallest misconstruction on his part?" As if this angel of modesty and self-sacrifice would plume herself with the claim that even the smallest criticism could not be made of her smallest error! That would make Desdemona unnaturally and absurdly self-complacent. In truth, the last thing Desdemona would do would be to accuse Othello, and here as elsewhere she struggles to fasten the blame upon herself.

*Des.* He says he will return incontinent:  
He hath commanded me to go to bed,  
And bade me to dismiss you.

*Emil.* Dismiss me!

*Des.* It was his bidding: therefore, good Emilia,  
Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu:  
We must not now displease him.

Surprised as Emilia was when directed to spread the wedding sheets upon the bed, she has not yet recovered herself, but is again taken aback when told she is to be dismissed and Othello is coming to the chamber. "Dismiss me!" She has been in such constant nightly attendance upon Desdemona, and has become so thoroughly accustomed to the fact of an unconsummated marriage of the "perfect soul,"—the love of the soul perfectly free of the body's entanglements,—she cannot bring herself to think of it as anything else. She knew Othello's purpose, and she cannot believe he has changed it and now intends to consummate the marriage, even though Desdemona herself says so. Emilia was not a woman of high ideas nor any too great faith in virtue; she grounds her confidence in Desdemona on the fact of her constant attendance and personal knowledge. When it came to the charge of Desdemona's guilt with Cassio, she exclaimed:

"Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?  
What place? what time? what form? what likelihood?"

Of her own personal knowledge she declares Desdemona's guilt impossible. But Emilia soon has orders from both Othello and Desdemona to

leave Desdemona's chamber at night. The horror redoubles as we realize that Desdemona orders Emilia's absence for one sacrifice while Othello demands it to enforce another.

Even when Othello ordered the attendant dismissed and his wife to retire, Desdemona could not comfort herself with the thought that she had acted in wifely anticipation of his wishes when she ordered the wedding sheets upon her bed. It might seem as if she was now about to do something to please him; to make a rightful sacrifice that should bring her some reward; to fulfill her long though vaguely cherished intent. According to her belief she had now started on the way to reclaim Othello's love, but the intermarriage when made physical is so against nature that the mistakenly devoted creature can have no throb of hope or proper feeling about its consummation. Instead an awful sense of impending sacrifice settles upon her. It was impossible she could at last arrange her marriage bed for a man of alien race and blood without a benumbing of soul and body. The perfect soul love in which she and Othello once exulted is now to be destroyed forever. Premonitions of death creep over her. She begins to think of the wedding sheets as shrouds.

*Emil.* I have laid those sheets you bade me on the bed.

*Des.* All's one. Good faith, how foolish are our minds!  
If I do die before, prithee, shroud me \*  
In one of those same sheets.

\* Modern editors spoil Desdemona's syncopated language by causing her to speak of death "before thee." The first



Then the willow song which she tries in vain to drive from her mind has to be sung, and after that a reaction is born of the thought she is preparing to do her prorogued duty by Othello.

*Des.* Good-night, good-night; heaven me such uses send,  
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!

These lines have never been correctly explained. The "uses" Desdemona has in mind are those Emilia has just spoken of as pertaining to "sport and frailty," and are such as she says husbands make of wives and teach to wives. Desdemona cannot accept such an idea. She prays Heaven for a husband's uses, not to learn passion or desire from his example, but to use such things to mend her error of omission and make her wifely duty more perfect. But Othello comes to the bed only to take Desdemona's life. "Will you come to bed, my lord?" was the invitation never to be answered by Othello; but after he had taken her life and awakened to the knowledge of her innocence what a

folio properly omitted "thee." To speak of dying before Emilia would be extremely vague and indefinite, as both were young and might well live half a century. Desdemona is thinking of death intervening before the accomplishment of the nuptial purpose for which she and Emilia are preparing, and she uses "before" much as she had no doubt often used "because," well knowing that Emilia would fill out the gap and complete the sense. And Emilia at once chides her for foolish fears, which would be absurd if she had understood Desdemona to refer to an event probably so vaguely distant and uncertain as that of dying before her, which might occur half a century hence. She knew what was meant.

world of tragedy was summed up in the lament over her dead form:

“ Cold, cold, my girl,  
Even like thy chastity! ”

And at the close it is Emilia, the constant attendant, who puts the cup to Othello's lips by giving conclusive testimony to the innocence of Desdemona.

*Oth.* Thy husband knew it all.

*Emil.* My husband!

*Oth.* Thy husband.

*Emil.* That she was false to wedlock?

*Oth.* Ay, with Cassio. Nay, had she been true,  
If heaven would make me such another world  
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,  
I'd not have sold her for it.

*Emil.* My husband!

*Oth.* Ay, 'twas he that told me first:  
An honest man he is, and hates the slime  
That sticks on filthy deeds.

*Emil.* My husband!

*Oth.* What needs this iteration, woman? I say thy husband.

*Emil.* O mistress, villainy hath made mocks with love!  
My husband say that she was false!

*Oth.* He, woman;  
I say thy husband; dost understand the word?  
My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago.

This extraordinary iteration, with Emilia's astonished exclamation so oft repeated, attests the strength of her conviction that her husband of all men knew the truth about Desdemona,—knew it from her constant companionship and as she told it

to him,—and poor as was her opinion of Iago, she had not thought him capable of such cruel slander when he personally knew better. As she listens to Othello's revelations and recalls what she had told Iago from time to time, she can only keep crying "My husband!"

As the climax approaches, the testimony of Emilia, the daily and nightly attendant of Desdemona, is so positive and direct it forces the truth into the wrought and perplexed mind of the Moor as no other testimony could. The very woman he appointed to have personal knowledge of Desdemona's relations with him in marriage is the one who, by virtue of that appointment, is now able to vindicate her with others also, and to overwhelm Othello himself with proof of Desdemona's innocence and his own guilt. Alas, that a dramatic climax so splendid has been so long obscured by false interpretation!

Time and again does Emilia declare Desdemona innocent, not on the ground of faith or confidence, but because in her position she has absolute knowledge of the young wife's conduct. She assumes everybody will concede the accuracy of her knowledge about Desdemona; that she knew her relations with all men, her husband included, and the only question is whether she is telling the truth. Othello, too, assumed if Desdemona was guilty Emilia must know it. Thus when Emilia vowed she had seen nothing "nor ever heard nor ever did suspect," Othello classed her as a keeper of villainous secrets. He could not think it possible Desde-

mona could be guilty and Emilia not know it. So at last Emilia spoke as one having personal knowledge:

“ Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor;  
So come my soul to bliss as I speak true! ”

Emilia makes this assertion not as one who believes or has faith, but has actual knowledge; and she risks heaven on the truth of her assertion. Her testimony is the more convincing as her faith in female virtue was not strong. She believed the world full of unfaithful wives, but the blame rested on their husbands, and the women did right in retaliating wrong for wrong. She expressly declared provocation such as Desdemona had received was sufficient. Yet she affirms the purity of Desdemona's conduct of her own knowledge. Only such knowledge could prompt Emilia to speak so strongly. She had dropped broad suggestions to Desdemona only to find the meaning was not understood.

“ O she was heavenly true ! ”

Thus does Emilia bear testimony, not to marital fidelity or wifely honor, but to the surpassing, heavenly innocence of a virgin wife.



## CHAPTER VII.

### BRABANTIO'S SEVERITY AND OTHELLO'S RECALL.

EVEN the most dotting of Shakespeare's commentators have failed to refute the charge of unnatural conduct in Brabantio in casting his daughter off with a cruel calumny, or to prove that the action of the Senate in recalling Othello so soon was not highly improbable or absurd. But have we not now an answer to both these posers? Will not the interpretation now suggested help us to meet them otherwise than with a prudent silence?

Brabantio could not forgive the marriage, as did his fellows in the Senate, or regard it from the poetic side: his standpoint was different. He was a man of great family pride and hope; Desdemona was his only child; through her alone could his blood descend, and the "noble matches" proposed to her had met with his approval as they foreshadowed fit heirs for his honors and his fortune. Almost his first thought when told of the marriage with the Moor was the bitterness and disappointment his old age must suffer in consequence. The cunning Iago knew the weak point, just where to strike Brabantio hardest, when in announcing the elopement and marriage he pictured the old noble becoming the grandsire of hybrid or half-animal offspring. As this marriage could continue Bra-

bantio's blood only in the channels of miscegenation, the old magnifico could never consent to it or forgive it. If such things were tolerated, the half-breed offspring of Moors would become heirs to the honors and wealth of Venetian nobles.

"Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be."

Anguished and outraged beyond possibility of repair, Brabantio cast after Desdemona a fearful parting shot, warning Othello that as she had deceived her father she might her husband. It was cruel, but the provocation was great. It could not reconcile Brabantio to show him that the marriage was platonic; his hopes were still ruined. And yet the charge of unfilial conduct, so often lodged against Desdemona, cannot be sustained. It was her supreme innocence which made her lose sight of Othello's color and think she could not be wrong in following him any more than other women had been with their husbands, or even as her own mother in marrying her father. She was utterly blind to the one thing which made her case utterly different, and could not see why she should not be pardoned, as were other daughters guilty of elopement and secret marriage. Brabantio has been too severely censured by those who do not appreciate the bitterness forced upon him: Desdemona unjustly accused by those who do not see how completely blind she was to the fact of her marriage being different from elopements that were pardoned and forgotten. She dreaded her father's "impatient thoughts," for he had been to her a "lord of

duty," but felt that she was not doing more than parents usually forgave after the first disappointment. So indeed Brabantio would have forgiven it if Othello had been white. He had forbidden Roderigo to haunt about his doors, and yet when he heard of the elopement regretted that "the snipe" had not won Desdemona. He might have been reconciled even to Roderigo as a son-in-law, but a marriage which at most would do nothing for the old noble and his hopes but to mix his blood with that of pagans and bondslaves could receive from him only a father's curse. The supreme fact to which the daughter was so utterly blind—Othello's color and illegitimate marital blood—was one never to be overlooked by the father.

Equally satisfactory is the theory of the platonic marriage in solving the long-standing enigma of Othello's displacement from command so soon after his arrival at Cyprus.

It is no fault in Shakespeare that he puts clocks in Cæsar's time, makes cannons and pistols fire before they were invented, or tells us Hamlet was a student of a university not founded until long after Hamlet's time. These things violate historical accuracy, not true dramatic probability—the probability which is true to the plot and the characters. In this play, however, the accepted interpretation leaves Shakespeare responsible for a gross violation of real dramatic probability in that Othello, the favorite general, is displaced from command and recalled within a day or two after being sent to Cyprus. He was chosen by the unanimous voice

of the Senate as the ablest and safest general; nothing had occurred to slubber the gloss of his great reputation, and yet before he is more than fairly under way his recall is ordered and a commander confessed to be his inferior is put in his place. Why should the Senate do such a thing? True, the Turkish fleet has perished, and the danger of war is over, but that is no reason for a change of generals, and the fact could not be known to the Senate to exist at the time the recall was ordered. No critic or commentator has been able to give a respectable reason, standing dramatic tests, for the recall of Othello at a time the Senate had every reason to suppose he would be hotly engaged with the enemy, but a consistent dramatic explanation can be found in the interpretation now offered.

Othello, when he appeared before the Senate, feared his strange marriage would prejudice him, not simply as a man, but as a commander of the army. His most strenuous efforts were put forth to convince the senators that it would not unfit him for military responsibility and duty to have Desdemona with him. He used his greatest emphasis in refuting this suspicion, and for the time at least he met with entire success. His tale of poetic love carried the senators off their feet, and they gave hearty consent that Desdemona should accompany the Moor to the front. This conclusion was reached after hearing the avowals of both Othello and Desdemona and while under the spell which the personal presence of the pair produced. But did the senators continue in that satisfied belief after the



two were gone and that wondrous tale of poetic love was no longer sounding in their ears? Just as the action is such as to keep the reader or spectator in some passing doubt, to make him feel some qualms of suspense, about the pair living up to Othello's high resolve, opposed as it is by Desdemona, so it is reasonable to think of misgivings stealing over the senators after Othello and Desdemona had gone. The signiors were the high judges of the state, and if swept from their accustomed calm by Othello's eloquent and picturesque tale of love, they would soon recover their severe judicial habit and ask whether good could come of this marriage, whether they had not given too hasty approval. That fear once started would be sure to grow. Brabantio continued to regard the marriage as abhorrent, and soon after died of a broken heart—an ill omen surely for a daughter's happiness.

If the high idealism of the marriage failed, would it not fall to the opposite extreme? What, then, would be the effect upon Othello? Should command be left to a black general involved in the honeymoon of a *mésalliance*? Would there be no anxiety over an officer charged with critical command who had just entered into an unnatural marriage? That his "disports" might "corrupt his business" was certainly a natural second thought with Othello's worthy and approved good masters, and, as such a fear came to them with mature reflection, they hastened to order his recall. The recall of Othello is no oversight in Shakespeare, but

gives another evidence of his art as we see him weaving the unnatural marriage into the warp and woof of the drama in triple threads—one from the platonic, one from the base conception of Iago, one from the doubts of agitated and anxious well-wishers. The senators, like ourselves, convinced at first, cannot avoid recurring doubt whether Othello is not attempting the impossible. Such is the solution of a difficulty in the "Othello" left heretofore without a shadow of acceptable explanation.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### UNTYING A DRAMATIC KNOT.

AN independent or additional confirmation of the *motif* which I see in the "Othello" is supplied by the "double time" of the piece—a feature long involved in peculiar difficulty. While modern playgoers were first to stick at the trouble of Othello's color, the seeming disaccord in the dramatic time of the piece usually affects the reader only, and it is even doubtful whether listeners sitting at the play would ever have discovered it, so rapidly and absorbingly are they hurried along in the sweep of the action. (Even the patient students who labor to disjoint the piece and then articulate the scenes and incidents were slow to penetrate into the astounding fact of only one night—and that the one of the nuptial celebration—intervening between the arrival at Cyprus and the culmination of the murder of Desdemona by the Moor. Obviously there can be no reason or probability in a devoted wife being seduced from her husband within twenty-four hours after the beginning of her wedded life, and the mystery is heightened by strangely contradictory allusions which indirectly but certainly cast upon the mind the impression of a considerable period of time having passed after the marriage and before the climax of the tragic jealousy and rage. Thus

Othello speaks of the act of shame as being "a thousand times committed," Emilia tells us her husband had "a hundred times" woo'd her to steal the handkercher, and with liberal allowance for colloquial and poetic license these expressions must still impress us with a belief of a considerable period of wedded life at Cyprus before the culmination of jealousy. Seizing upon these singular and contradictory expressions, and struggling against the clear time-movement indicative of one day only at Cyprus, several commentators have put forth strained efforts to suppose the lapse of a period of time sufficient for the growth or development of a post-nuptial jealousy—have arbitrarily supposed "long time at Venice after the marriage," although the elopement, the trial scene, and the embarking occur on the same night; or have tried to find proofs of a "long time at Cyprus after marriage" with equal ill success, the wiser readers concluding to accept the simple fact of the double time movement without trying to explain how it is accomplished, but confident Shakespeare's "two clocks" are those of an artist, not a blunderer.

Professor Wilson offered the plausible, although incidentally repulsive, suggestion that we cannot think of Othello throwing his arms about the disrobed bosom of Desdemona night after night while having jealous suspicion in his heart; and hence the action had to forge ahead without even a single night of marital life intervening. Mrs. Clarke tendered an explanation which is barely plausible at first glance, and certainly cannot sustain the test of



analysis. She thinks Shakespeare "had to give the brief effect of recent marriage consequent upon the elopement and secret espousals which occur in the opening of the play; and he had also to give the lengthened effect of conjugal union, in order to add to the tragic impression of broken wedded faith and destroyed wedded happiness." Rather should it be thought that as the full conjugal meeting of black and white is a thing of aversion and repulsion, even with the sanction of law and religion, and with no attending serpent of jealous mistrust, we should expect a dramatic artist to make every effort to condense the time, or use some other device to take away all opportunity for such a union to be brought to completion before the tragic end. If some hard necessity had compelled Shakespeare to deal with a conjugal union doubly offensive, because between opposing races and because extending over a time when the husband's heart was full of suspicion, he could, if forced to a task so inartistic, have denoted the fact of a consummated relationship by something clearly indicating long time after the marriage either at Cyprus or Venice. Instead he has not merely failed to indicate an established wedded relation, but has dovetailed the piece against any such assumption on our part—a construction thoroughly inexplicable unless it was the intent to guard Desdemona's supreme chasteness by closing every hour and scene against the possibility alike of guilt with Cassio on the one hand or of a consummated marriage with the black husband on the other.

Quite different is the view taken heretofore of the close sequence of the drama. William Archer, the eminent English dramatic critic, in an article in *St. James* in 1881, really first formulated the conclusion of Desdemona being kept so constantly in her husband's eye and company as to make actual guilt with Cassio a physical impossibility. The hurried nature of the action was not first disclosed by him, as he seemed to think, for it had been reviewed elaborately by others, especially Professor Wilson; but Archer was the first to reach the momentous conclusion of the scenes being so closely woven and dovetailed as seemingly to cut off all possibility of guilt from Desdemona, and leave Othello where he must know the charge against her was a physical impossibility. It was unfortunate that so striking a discovery should be incomplete and be undervalued by the writer who made it—treated as a proof of fault in Shakespeare instead of a new and brilliant display of his art. Archer unfortunately gave adherence to the idea of the "Othello" being not only inferior to Shakespeare's other tragedies, but in unaccountable and unworthy contrast to them in having an ill-constructed, unpoetic plot, or, as a still later critic puts it, presenting "a return to convention." Coinciding with this view, and adding the more demeaning one of Othello's jealousy being that of a fool, Archer could only think he had found an additional proof of loose, careless, inartistic, unworthy construction when he showed how Shakespeare placed Othello where, of his own observation, he knew Desdemona must be inno-

cent, and yet had the insane folly to treat her as guilty.

Archer's conclusion or analysis is a dangerous half-truth. Correct to an extent, and so important as to rank justly as a brilliant extension of Shakespearean study, it is yet an analysis which will not itself stand ultimate analysis. The fatal defect is that it covers and accounts for the hours only of daylight or common waking, showing indeed there could have been in that time no possible opportunity for guilt, as Othello must certainly have known; but failing of completeness because there is not the slightest reason to suppose Othello's suspicions were directed toward the interval between dawn and bedtime, where the dramatic sequence is so close-woven as to leave no possible opportunity for Desdemona's guilt. To suspect guilt as occurring in the daytime would be a gross absurdity in Othello; no such idea occurs or can occur to him. His suspicion is directed from the first to the hours of night and to them exclusively, and it so happens they are the precise hours not brought into Archer's analysis, but thoughtlessly glossed over with the unproved and unprovable assumption of Othello being all that time with Desdemona. If so, her guilt with Cassio is impossible; Othello knows that to be true; his suspicion is irrational; his jealousy imbecile, and the whole plot a thing of wretched degradation, not poetic art.

Desdemona's life in daylight is so cut off from all possible guilt that the Moor has to look, does look, and can only look, to the night-time as supplying

opportunity; and thus a fine double stroke is achieved, for the same suggestions which show him fixing the scene of guilt in Desdemona's bridal chamber in the night necessarily attest his absence at that time. Then, too, he always places the guilt at such time and place that Emilia must have known it, and indeed have aided and abetted it as "the closet lock and key." Guilt at a time and place where this woman of the bedchamber would not know it he never thinks of as possible. Powerful dramatic work this. Iago says Cassio has confessed, giving the utmost details of time and scene—

"Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when."

This broad and sweeping claim of opportunities does not seem to Othello in the least incredible, as it surely would if it referred to them as existing in daylight. On the contrary, he at once feels that the claimed opportunities meet the test of his own knowledge as to the ones which may have been had at night with Emilia's connivance. "Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber." That could not have been in the day, for Othello knew of Desdemona's every act from dawn to darkness. And it could have been possible at night only in case Othello was absent from Desdemona's chamber. It is because of his assured and certain absence Othello thinks the nuptial chamber was chosen as the scene of guilt. He never speaks of any other place as possible. Thus we get the double effect of Othello's absence being denoted more strongly



than before; and the agony of the Moor is intensified with the belief that the place he had kept so religiously sacred is used by foul perversion as the safest of all for his dishonor. Alas, that such consummate art has gone so long unseen and unappreciated.

Othello's conviction of guilty opportunity being found in his own nuptial chamber at night is attested further by the punishment he fixes for the crime. When Iago suggests that he shall strangle Desdemona "even in the bed she hath contaminated," he cries "Good, good—the justice of it pleases; very good." It is the particular bed which is here spoken of—rightfully if not actually Othello's own—just as it was his rightful if not actual chamber. And again as he goes to slay her he vows that "the bed lust stain'd shall with lust's blood be spotted"—a most piteous specific avowal to us who know that same bed was ever innocent as the virginal wedding sheets put upon it at last for Othello.

Right here we have another of the significant alterations Shakespeare made in adapting his plot from the old Italian tale. Cinthio provides many opportunities for the supposed guilt of Desdemona to be repeated, and the ancient, in his account of Cassio's pretended confession, quotes him thus to the Moor: "He says he has enjoyed your wife every time that you have stayed long enough from home to give him an opportunity." Shakespeare narrows the time and scenes to make us see Desdemona so closely under the eye of Othello that the Moor must

know the only possible opportunity for guilt is in the night and at the time of his own voluntary self-exclusion from the bridal chamber, thus flashing upon us the double revelation of Desdemona's virginity sacredly preserved and of the Moor's suffering being keyed beyond mere jealousy into moral agony. Love yielding up its hearted throne within the time of the honeymoon, and usurping wrong taking its place in the bridal chamber itself, and at a time when that scene was made doubly sacred by the self-exclusion of the rightful husband—where in all tragedy is there a situation more poignant or piteous than this, as it pressed with tragic force upon the great-hearted barbarian?

What possible purpose, other than the one now suggested, could Shakespeare have had in so closing the scenes together as to render it as impossible for Desdemona's delicacy to be blurred in marriage as for her virtue to be stained outside it? But what masterly skill it is which limits, hedges in, cuts down, and restricts the action within such hours that every opportunity for stain or guilt upon Desdemona is excluded by being otherwise accounted for and checked off in our minds, while in the mind of Othello we see one opening left for suspicion and self-deception—an opening which, like a burning-glass, concentrates his fears to a focus at the precise point where the agony is most acute! The brief, hurried action which impresses our minds with no time or opportunity for either the stain of guilt or the blot of indelicacy upon Desdemona, and with the only chance in the mind of Othello

being the one created by his own chaste absence, presents one of the finest dramatic situations ever conceived by genius. Shakespeare did not plan to reach this effect through the critical dissection of his plot, but by the artistic illusion it should produce; hence the construction is logical, not to the last analysis, but to the point needful for the dramatic impression.

Shakespeare did not intend the detail of only one night at Cyprus and the development of the jealousy in a single day to be visible, and it is likely this construction would never have been uncovered if it had been left to be dealt with exclusively by the one class for which Shakespeare wrote—the listeners at the play. Upon them the illusion was perfect; the old playgoers who knew the hymeneal symbolism had the spirit which giveth life, not the letter which killeth. Without conscious analysis they felt that the brief time after marriage, with the scenes of Desdemona's life all accounted for finally and with nuptial suggestions yet resting upon her, effectually negated a consummated marriage with Othello, and yet the action was relieved of any appearance of undue haste or crowding. To avoid an excess or over-strain in the closeness and tenseness of the action, Shakespeare relieves it by occasional passing suggestions of long time, but throws them in deftly without arousing us to any consciousness of a contradictory or disturbing impression. This is the true meaning of the mystery of the long and short time: previous theories, by consenting to long time for a hideous consummation or

by leaving the enforced short time without a trace of dramatic need or purpose, have thrown one of the noblest situations known to the drama into a miserable cloud of seeming blundering and looseness of construction.

By some mighty magic or witchcraft, differing from any Brabantio ever dreamed of, Shakespeare makes us think of Othello and Desdemona as if married for some considerable time,—a few months at least,—and yet never lets them get beyond the peculiar surroundings and suggestions of a stayed nuptial night. The last glimpse we have of Desdemona, in the scene immediately before the one of her death, shows her disclosed to us in a bridal disrobing. Just how or why this peculiar effect of bridal or nuptial incompleteness is attained, while the impression of a considerable period of wedded life having elapsed is also produced, remains a mystery which must ever be felt by every attentive student of the play, although logically accounted for by none. We have simply to accept the fact of such impression being produced upon us by suggestions of “long time after marriage” on the one hand and fresh hymeneal strokes on the other.

Vastly stronger and plainer all this to Shakespeare's first audiences, as they caught the full force and meaning of the hymeneal symbolism. Unlike the benighted playgoers and readers of later days, the audiences of Shakespeare's time were quickly affected by the freshening hymeneal allusions of the play. They saw something of import in Othello being found absent from his bride



at midnight and but an hour or two after the ceremony on the wedding night; something significant in the sudden parting and journey to Cyprus with bride and groom in separate ships; something in Othello's peculiar speech to Desdemona at the door of the nuptial chamber; something in the interruption of the brawl on the nuptial night, disclosing the Moor absent from his bride; something in his examination of her hand to determine the nature of her impulses of sex, and something of surpassing importance in the preparation of the bed after the couple had been some time married, and yet with Desdemona presenting to the Elizabethans an occasion and custom of wedding sheets, which in their time and their minds could denote nothing but a marriage not yet consummated. Those old playgoers never made a complaint of this piece as lacking in artistic construction; it was their greatest favorite.

There is no falling away from poetic methods, no "return to convention," no inexplicable use of inferior, commonplace, non-Shakespearean development in the "Othello," but superb art instead. A correct interpretation will show the artistic skill of the poet tuned here in a higher key than ever before, and especially in the double impression of Othello and Desdemona as if married for some time and yet with nuptials all uncelebrated. What possible device could have been better adapted to help this development in the way of suggestive dramatic touches than to weave the scenes of daylight together, so that we must see Othello can have no

possible ground for his suspicions unless they are referred in his own mind to the times and hours of night as the only ones when he is absent from his bride? Viewed in that way, the peculiar construction which has been pronounced grossly irregular and careless is a device of consummate art, as it not only helps along our rising dramatic hope of Desdemona being what Fletcher termed "a maiden wife, a wifely maid," but compels us to see the involuntary suspicion forcing its poison roots into the tenderest and truest place in Othello's soul as his own sacred absence appears to be Cassio's opportunity.

But did earlier audiences grasp quickly such depths of meaning to which we are utterly blind? Hymeneal poetry and nuptial celebrations had accustomed them to watch for and follow the post-nuptial events of married life with eager interest and in a more poetic and elevated spirit than we are apt to credit at first thought. That was the time when the now-forgotten hymeneal poetry was in the first and fullest bloom of popularity. Hence no suggestion, however light, which grew out of or touched upon the events of a nuptial celebration, would pass unnoticed. Weaving his plot for minds thus prepared, Shakespeare determined to keep the "maiden wife" with the hymeneal fresh upon her to the close, when she was to die "in her virgin bed," and hence the hints and suggestions which hold her ever within the atmosphere of approaching nuptials, although, as on the bridal night, we shudder with fear for her and are then suddenly,

gloriously relieved. Appreciating and understanding every light touch of nuptial suggestion as we cannot, Shakespeare's early audiences were stirred with mingled hope and pathos that a thing so holy and beautiful as the platonic marriage should be fated to develop, not into brightness, but piteous tragic woe. Seeing Othello subjected to the strain of a supposed awful wrong, and knowing the eyes of the Moor were fastened upon holiest hours as the ones presenting basest opportunity, the early playgoers had to pity him even as they pitied the fairer victim.

Archer's notable discovery or analysis, when properly applied, is simply one more proof added to the many which have broken down the old idea of Shakespeare as careless in plot, and proved him instead careful and artistic beyond rivalry. As Moulton says, Shakespeare "elevated the whole conception of plot." Modern scholarship tends strongly to the opinion of his greatest effect upon the drama being, not in his poetry, but in the immense improvement he effected in the art of weaving the plot. Few better evidences of this need be asked than the construction which forces the listener to look with Othello's eyes and find the food and soil of suspicion in those scenes and hours of night which to him show a chance for guilt, but most truthfully and piteously disclose to us the sacred absence and abstinence which Othello wrongly thought foully abused.

## CHAPTER IX.

### DESDEMONA'S FAULT AND FATE.

As we have seen, if Othello is whitened into a proper husband for Desdemona, there remains no reason why she should not have married him; hence no dramatic motive for hurrying her on to a tragic doom. Her death at Othello's hands imperatively requires that she must have done wrong in marrying him. Only so can we find what the Germans call the "logical justification" for her dreadful fate. With neither Othello nor Desdemona is there any offense against conscience; but Shakespeare often and justly makes mistakes mortal. A man of Othello's temperament, constitution, and years could not lead a celibate life in constant association with a blooming young Venetian wife. In his own language, he tempted Heaven in his impossible struggle; he undermined his own sense of content and trust and fell at last a victim to his fatal mistake. But what of Desdemona? A celibate life might have been no impossible thing for her; but if she had entered into marriage expecting or intending only such a union, there would remain the question of wrong to the virile Othello in requiring of him a husband's duties without allowance of a husband's dues. But we are not required to deal with that difficulty; for Shakespeare provides clear



proof of Othello alone intending the non-consummation, and denotes a contrary expectation in the mind of Desdemona from the first.

The two expressions which show that Desdemona expected a consummated union are, for the sake of her delicacy, oblique, indirect, seemingly accidental, yet sufficiently clear and plain. Thus she unconsciously betrays the expectation in her mind of a complete union with Othello when, in talking to Cassio and telling how she will beset her lord on his behalf, she gayly declares "his bed shall seem a school." There shall he get his curtain lectures and petitions on behalf of Cassio. She is thinking and talking only of Cassio, but betrays her belief that Othello's absence from her chamber is not to be permanent. She took the wedding sheets with her when she eloped, and orders them put on her couch when Othello at last comes to her chamber, as she thinks to consummate the marriage, really to take her life. But before, in the fourth act, when Othello asks in towering rage if she is not a wanton, she had replied:

"If to preserve this vessel for my lord  
From any other foul, unlawful touch  
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none."

That is just what she has been doing—preserving the vessel for her lord. And therein lies her tragic fault. From the standpoint of daily life and society no sentiment, no purity of motive could render it right for Desdemona to devote herself physically to Othello and invite hybrid offspring.

Expecting and consenting to such a relation, however innocently and half consciously, she is exposed, despite the wondrous beauty of her nature, to the full force of Adams' jeer when he asks who would want her for a daughter or a sister. She makes a fatal mistake. Shakespeare preserves her from carrying out her intent; she never loses her hold upon our sympathies; but while her fault is beautifully extenuated by pure and unselfish motives, we cannot but think she erred fatally and invited disaster in marrying with "the black Othello," intending and expecting the union to be consummated, although without a full realization of all that marriage with a blackamoor implied.

Othello and Desdemona threw themselves deliberately against nature's barrier of race: he, thinking to do more than such a man could; she, more than such a woman ever should. Their expectations were divergent and opposing; but it would be hard to say which was the more unnatural. Both invited, provoked, disaster. It is not in nature for white and black to intermarry in their situation and not challenge calamity in some form.

Desdemona's error is beautifully and pathetically palliated, but never wiped out. She had perhaps at first only a somewhat vague idea of marital relations, but a clear consciousness of her awful mistake fell upon her when she was brought near, as she thought, to fruition. Then came her argument and forced self-assurance that it was "meet, very meet" she should be used so. Alas, were that indeed true, Desdemona had no need to try to reassure and en-

courage herself. Nor could she have felt the strange dread, as of fearful impending calamity, which came over her when she began to disrobe herself and thought of her maiden wedding sheets being turned to shrouds. This bridal disrobing, with its freezing fear and dread—how different it is from the banter, gayety, and chaff usually marking such scenes in the Elizabethan drama. Already Desdemona is feeling, if she does not realize or admit, some of the consequences of her fearful error. It is true Othello would never have permitted her to consummate the union as she desperately intended, but, barred from false physical devotion, she was still guilty of a wrong to herself and to the Moor.

Desdemona did a great wrong indeed to Othello. Her advances led him into fatal marriage; when he then attempted heroically to overcome the essential vice of the union by keeping it platonic, his situation was one of unnatural and unendurable strain. Uneasy, anxious, strained, the doors of Othello's soul were thrown open for invading doubts. With Desdemona it was different, but she could not have been permanently content or safe in the unconsummated marriage, even if there had been no Iago and Othello had not been moved to mistrust. The celibate life must be led under conditions and circumstances fit for celibacy. If Desdemona had lived long such a life while married to Othello, every day her yearning to pay the full and absolute tribute of love would have been checked, denied, turned awry, until she must have felt the power of temptation to-

ward one of her own race in a way she could never have been tried as a maiden. Desdemona could not have been happy as a wife without rendering the final sacrifice of wifehood. She exposed herself to suspicion as no woman should ever do; to temptation as none should ever dare. The incredible and improbable thing was that she could be long content in the unnatural marriage. It would have been wrong for her to accept Othello; it was almost equally wrong to live with him in unnatural denial and aloofness, both being in the full strength of the reproductive age and state. Nemesis was due, first, for Desdemona, who in her weakness had invoked the whole calamity, and then upon Othello, who had yielded to her suggestion of marriage and afterward sought all too late to rectify the blunder by superhuman and impossible denial.

In what other way can we ever reconcile the fearful doom to which the lovely Desdemona is brought? To suppose her actually devoted to Othello supplies indeed ample dramatic reason for her death at the hands of her black husband, but it unfits both him and her for rational sympathy, ruins the action, wrecks the whole play. It cannot be. The text, the situation, the characterization, the side lights and fore lights of Shakespeare's day all point unerringly to a quasi or arrested marriage, but with an intent on Desdemona's part—happily inhibited—to devote herself fully to the Moor, as supplying the reason for her taking off.

At first, and for a brief time, Desdemona's instincts showed her truly the wrong of marrying



with Othello. That she did "shake and fear" the looks of the Moor even when "she lov'd them most" is proof not of dissimulation, as has been so often asserted, but that she tried instinctively to avoid this strange love or to blind her eyes to it, even as she did those of her father, "close as oak." It was not, as Iago said, a seeming that compelled Desdemona to tremble as this love stole upon her; it was a sense of unfitness, unnaturalness. Unhappily the hesitation was but for an hour. As the noble nature of the Moor was unfolded before her the die was soon cast; Desdemona put away every doubt and fear and thereafter knew naught but love, confidence, and trust.

Desdemona's fault is so plain we can never deny that her fate was invited by her own act. The marriage into which she rushed so ill-advisedly could not come to good, only bring her to disillusionment and calamity one way or another.

Usually Shakespeare's sympathies are all with lovers. He helps them conquer the opposition of parents, society, and frowning fortune, but it is clear that he draws a line where the marriage is essentially in conflict with the proprieties of the family and cannot culminate naturally and properly in family life. The great, final justification is then lacking. Shakespeare would have gladly helped Othello and Desdemona triumph over any opposition of Brabantio which sprang from mere pride or ambition; over any antagonism of Venetian society based on the desire of a "noble match" for Desdemona. But with his views of family life, and his

principle of judging actions and relations by the results to which they must lead, he could never be blinded by sentiment into approving a marriage which could produce only a mixed offspring and hybrid family. Yet Shakespeare no sooner demonstrates the fault of the marriage and fastens it upon our minds never to be removed, than he demonstrates anew how nobly blind Othello and Desdemona were to the error. Desdemona's sad mistake springs from no selfishness, but from an extravagance of womanly devotion. Nor is there any weak, foolish self-deception. She is not deceived in the least about the true character of the Moor; she sees the real Othello in his glorious manhood and whiteness of life surpassing all the men she had ever known; and if she was unmoved by other suitors, she could only hasten to lay her love at the feet of this one, telling him she wished "heaven had made" "such a man" for her. It was not, as so many have thought, a spirit of romance and love of military glory that swept Desdemona to the Moor; it was instinctive appreciation of his noble manhood and irresistible womanly response to it—the response of one preternaturally sensitive to worth in the opposite sex, and so super-refined that she could sink the physical in the mental, completely ignoring Othello's blood and color. She was impelled, not by romance or imagination, but by a quick-responding sensibility and a hunger to render a woman's devotion to Othello. Desdemona is not imaginative like Juliet, with a mind flowing forth in tropes and imagery. Her lan-

guage is extremely simple. "My dear Othello" is her greeting after the long separation and the dangers of the ocean. Only once does she speak of Othello's military glory; and even then as much stress is laid upon "his honors" as upon "his valiant parts." She is not love-sick, not a victim of infatuation, but inspired by true, high-born, unselfish, womanly devotion to a man most worthy of such love in every respect save one.

Romantic love did not come to Desdemona on an enchanted isle of the sea, nor in storm or shipwreck, nor in the moonlight night when the nightingale sang in the palm, but in the quiet of her own home she was surprised while engaged in her household duties. The touch of home and home life, of domesticity and of the quiet, well-bred, womanly spirit, prevents us thinking for a moment of Desdemona as a victim of intoxicated fancy, but adds to the wonder and pity of her love.

Only as the household affairs were dispatched would Desdemona return to listen to the Moor. As White says, we need not think Desdemona's care for the magnificent household of her father ever required her to soil the tips of her fingers, but this touch of refined, high-class domesticity ought, I think, to show the nature of a long-prevalent error and prove she was not a romantic enthusiast or a recluse, but a woman both of the world and the home. For the same reason Shakespeare tells us of her fondness for society and social gayety—to cause her devotion to Othello to seem most strange, wonderful. In the presence of everyone but the

Moor, Desdemona is queen o'er herself. The remarkable scene on landing at Cyprus, so generally slurred over by commentators, shows Desdemona as a woman by no means lacking in worldly wisdom, but clever enough to return Iago's banter and even get the best of him. These touches prove how wrong it is to think of Desdemona as an excessively romantic maiden or a recluse carried away by tales of adventure and martial glory. She is quite different: a queenly, self-poised young woman as admirable for sagacious judgment as for beauty and winsomeness, but suddenly overwhelmed by a strange, fatal, yet, in every sense but one, most truthful love. Desdemona was not deceived in regard to the Moor: he was just the man she thought him, and it is surely most piteous that this gentle, well-bred maiden, seeking happiness only in the home and the family, should become the victim of a love that could allow her neither family nor home—become a sacrifice through her own unselfish womanly devotion to an upright and exalted manhood. And yet, as the great error of the pair is so touchingly palliated, we cannot forget that marriage stops not with effect upon the mind, but, in proceeding to procreation of race, imposes conditions of fitness in blood and color which not even the soul love of Othello and Desdemona could defy.



## CHAPTER X.

### THE ACTION.

WHOLLY rejecting the prevailing theory of a plot built up merely to show the skilled malignancy of Iago in duping and tricking Othello, with little or no regard to other issues, repudiating the idea of Shakespeare subjecting such characters as Othello and Desdemona to repulsively brutal vivisection of soul only to show Iago's skill in that way, I claim the true central concept is in the great picture of upwardly aberrant sexual love presented under startling, contrasting, changing lights.

How tremendous the action of this play in the full force of the whirling contrasts and fearful onward rush! ~~First~~, an atmosphere of beauty and sweetness—an opening scene in "Venice, that mermaid of a city," when she was queen of the world—the city with the lions and the pigeons, signifying it was to find safety in valor and love. Once before Shakespeare brought us here—on the night when Jessica stole away from the wealthy Jew; and he comes again to the fair scene with another tale of race-prejudice and race-discord showing strange on such a background, but this time with a Moor, not a Jew—Othello supplanting Shylock. The first quick turn carries us from beauty to a sense of repulsion and disgust. Iago

sickens and nauseates us with his account of the union which Desdemona has just won by elopement—a marital state, bestial, animal-like, suited to the procreation of animal offspring,—with the Barbary horse, the old black ram, and worse similes still,—and we hear with pity the cry of the heart-broken father on learning his daughter has gone with the “lascivious Moor.” “With the Moor, say’st thou?” Nauseating surely to the last degree, but if we expurgate these intolerable expressions we shall fail to get the full force of the next contrast. “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?” Against Iago’s foulness we have the Moor’s own account of the matter—a story of poetic beauty such as not even Venice can have heard before. Angered and irritated at first by the glances of love which Desdemona bestows upon the swarth-shining Ethiop, sympathy and interest come stealing over us ere we are aware, and where we expected only vileness and repulsion we see one of the world’s choicest pictures of love and romance.

Against all the aspersions put upon him as a lusty Moor, as a user of foul arts, of drugs and witchcraft, Othello unfolds before us as one embodying the most admired heroism and idealism of the Elizabethan age—a gallant soldier and leader returned from distant wars and adventures in strange lands, yet resting under the clouds of early days. And as we look into the sweet and delicate nature of Desdemona, in all its artless innocence and truth, to see that love stirred in her breast, not

through illusion or delusion, but because she discerned with unerring clearness and truth the regal manhood of Othello, being blind only to his color, our sympathies must go out to the noble pair, and we feel that here is a marriage of poetic purity and beauty beyond the tales of old romance) and approaching as closely as unaided human power may permit to that of Joseph and Mary.

Summoned to a heroism greater than any he had shown in war, Othello responded, renouncing all tyranny of the blood and binding himself to the supreme duty of conduct free and bounteous to Desdemona's mind.

Swept by storm as we are in the splendid elevation of Othello's pledge of renunciation, we are not permitted to rest satisfied and content in this exaltation. The height is too great; the atmosphere too rarefied. With our weak human faith, waver we must; and as we fall back from that glorious burst to the lower key of the drama misgivings steal over us. May we not have overestimated Othello? May he not have overestimated himself? Soothed at first on seeing the nature of the poetic marriage, and the fact of no consummation in the present, we are agitated and alarmed when we turn toward the future and think of what may be yet to come—of hateful miscegenation lurking, specter-like, near at hand.

Hoping for some better and worthier outcome, conscious there can be no compromise or makeshift, we turn back to Othello, hearken joyfully again to his pledge of complete renunciation, and

follow the dramatist into the second act with breathless interest to learn whether he can and whether he shall make that promise good—shall overcome a lurking danger, to soft Desdemona fatal as a demon or a dragon.

Carried from our feet, even as were the senators, by the lofty story and pledge of the Moor, we also must fall back as they did in cooler moments to doubts, to fears. Will Othello be able to keep his pledge? Could any man do it under such circumstances of temptation?

Grand beyond the manner of men, beyond all comparison, as Othello has been in the making of his pledge, must we not have a renewed fear that even his splendid will may yet give way? His position is one of unnatural strain, for which God never intended such a man leading such a life and with no restraint save what came from the mind. Certainly unaided mortal strength was not intended to preserve such restraint save in the cloister and the celibate life.

So even before a cloud rises from the outside we see the strain telling upon the Moor—behold his resolution beset by revengeful nature, the tension being none the less severe because quietly borne. His extravagant joy on greeting Desdemona after an absence of two weeks was that of a man whose natural uneasiness and anxiety over the indecorum and irregularity of a runaway marriage had been increased rather than soothed; and his furious outburst against Cassio on the nuptial night was that of one already sorely tried, even



though others knew it not and he himself was hardly conscious of the cause.

Later we behold him at the door of the nuptial chamber on the night of the jubilee, with law and religion giving sanction, every restraint gone, and the very air pulsating with raptures, dismissing Desdemona to the aloofness of her own chamber. Can we ask or expect even Othello to withstand this strain day by day, through coming weeks, months, years? Can we deem him equal to such a pledge?

As a glassblower causes the glowing ball to swell and vary in startling wonder before our eyes—now promising an oblong, now a square, now a mounting taper, now a globe—so even as we look, hoping to see the lurking evil of miscegenation overcome in some way, yet fearing that result cannot be reached, there supervenes upon the poetic marriage a danger unthought of, unforeseen, rising from without, not within—the falsely aroused jealousy of Othello.

Not until solicitude over Desdemona's fate in marriage is well aroused and has fastened upon all hearts does the playwright advance to the strengthening and deepening complication—that of the famous temptation scene in the third act, when the dark flood of Othello's false suspicion is poured into a channel where the waters are already vexed with anxiety. First, suspense over the lot of Desdemona in marriage; second, alarm for the marriage itself; each storm-cloud flashing fitful and ominous gleams in the darkness, and each throw-

ing a lurid light on the other as they approach and form a vortex about the devoted Desdemona.

Upon a situation already anxious and ominous—as we are tossed between hope and fear over Desdemona's fate in marriage—arises the dark cloud of Othello's wrong suspicion, threatening ruin to the marriage itself and the destruction of the parties to it. And, wondrously pitiful, that jealousy is made to Othello to seem more real and true because of the sublime innocence and purity of his relations with Desdemona, just as a pure white surface is the one wantonness may most easily stain.

Not failing to see, not underestimating, the unmatched intellectual adroitness of Iago in falsely poisoning Othello with jealousy, profoundly moved as we must be by the agony of the Moor in which lofty honor is so cruelly mocked, we must yet see that the supreme dramatic triumph lies elsewhere—lies in the tremendous, unexpected changes which overcome us ere we are aware, and cause us finally to embrace what first we hated most.

Even more thrilling and wonderful than the first are the later tragic turns of the drama.

Roderigo! Of all surprises, is it not the greatest we should turn to the dupe, the snipe, as offering some hope for the relief of Desdemona? Skulking on the horizon of the drama, this "gull'd gentleman," this half-sated *roué*, seemed to have no other purpose than that of a subject on which we could see Iago playing his art of duping as if on small game in preparing for large; but now this contemptible creature, with his idea of buying Des-

demonia with gold and jewels, appears to have great possibilities of good in him, if he will only persist in his turn on Iago and demand the restoration of his treasures from Desdemona. If so, he must certainly expose Iago and thwart his whole villainy. Then another surprise. Roderigo, this "tool of the most dangerous description," who seemed at last almost certain to perform a service better men could not, and to figure as the only possible agency that could rescue Desdemona, is again overcome by Iago, and led backward by the nose as tenderly as asses are.

And poor Desdemona! Unconscious there was ever a possibility of her deliverance through Roderigo, she finds hope at last, not so much for herself as for Othello, and for us, in the very relation which at first was that of our utmost abhorrence. By a stranger alchemy than might convert base metal to gold a relation which was most repulsive becomes, for the moment at least, the one of our hope.

Wound in the boa-folds of false appearance until all hopes of full relief are gone and Othello is ready to take her life, as her cup of woe overflows there comes to the "wifely maid" the inspiration of proving her innocence to the Moor by dedicating herself in marriage to him. If the handkerchief was caused to speak against her falsely, the wedding sheets, as she believes, and as the nuptial poetry of her time taught, can give a testimony which no villainy can pervert, distort, or deny. Thus a marvelous reversal, like that of the first act, is worked

in the last on a grander scale. Even as we, like Desdemona, were compelled to be reconciled to the Moor and fall in love with what at first we feared to look upon, so finally hateful and abhorrent miscegenation is wrought to such a pitch as to appear in prospect stripped of repulsiveness, and, marvel of marvels, caused to figure as Desdemona's only hope of relief—the only thing that can bring deliverance to truth and honor.

Yet this can be done only if the Moor fall from his high estate; no longer aims to be free and bounteous to Desdemona's mind, but stoops to accept her mistaken and fatal, though most generous, devotion. This can only be if Othello is false to what we have so admired and honored in him, disappoints our early confidence and hope, and, leading Desdemona where she mistakenly asks to go, takes her to wreck. Which shall it be—ruin to Desdemona—ruin to the marriage—ruin to the Moor? Such is the prodigious power and force of the tragic storm sweeping us on into the last act as we cling despairingly to the almost uncherishable hope of Roderigo, and lose that only to seize the yet more forlorn one suggested by the wedding sheets—the baffling of Iago, although at untold cost to Desdemona. And Othello—how fearful the change in the man who was “not easily jealous but being wrought,”\* was swept on until the self-ruled

\* A wonderful word, expressing the trial which, starting with the early doubts of the propriety of the elopement, strengthened with the attempted austere denial in the constant presence of inviting, lawful opportunity, and cul-



and imperious general becomes for a time a frantic barbarian howling for blood and revenge!

These are the grand transfigurations, and yet all are lost alike in the prevailing interpretations of the piece both on and off the stage. Most lamentable is it that, in the theories of the play now extant and embodying the scholarship of two centuries, we have as common to them all the assumption of a marriage consummated early in the second act before the jealousy of Othello has been excited, or can be made to appear piteously on a background of white abstinence; too soon to prove Desdemona's innocence with Cassio, and yet before any stress of agony is laid upon her to reduce her to wreck; before the pair tread the wine-press of sorrow singly or together; before we can feel a throb of palliation or excuse—only sickening disgust. We are asked to see them enter into repulsive relations simply as a part of the anticipated felicity of early married life, when all was happy about them and the act could have no secondary consequences of a redeeming or justifying nature in confuting Iago's villainy. And after such consummation of the unnatural marriage we are asked to behold Desdemona radiantly happy, pure-spirited, delicate-minded as ever, even when perhaps she is already irremediably committed to a wrong maternity, to the motherhood of hybrid offspring. Utterly wrong, this. Wholly different the method of minated in Iago's fiendish transmutation of beauty and holiness into the basest treachery and dishonor.

Shakespeare in his slow but superlative transfiguration of the prospective miscegenation.

Only over a pathway of thorns and flint along which the feet must bleed, only after extenuation was piteously wrought out, would Shakespeare lead us or lead this matchless pair up to a miscegenation possible in our thought. He takes us with him in that direction blindly, unwillingly, through the undoing of Othello, through Desdemona's sorrow, through a series of tragic revolutions which disturb our prepossessions, unsettle strong prejudices, shake a rooted antipathy, and compel us at last, like a drowning wretch, to grasp at any straw of hope. Even in the under-key of the play we are put through an emotional oscillation and perturbation which trains our sympathies for new flights, accustoms them to unwonted effort. Roderigo is a contemptible creature, pitied and despised for believing he can buy Desdemona through Iago, and with the gold artfully bobbed from him by that wretch ostensibly for the unlawful purpose, but really for the knave's own greed. Naturally we would have more hope of a fool than of Roderigo, and yet at one point of the tragic unfolding, and against all previous inclination, we are compelled to turn hopefully toward him; seeing the dupe face his duper with anger and accusation, we cannot but hope he may be the means of exposing Iago and bringing Desdemona a complete and final vindication. The "gull'd gentleman" becomes for a time the center of our hopes, the man who may

bring deliverance, whom one small act may transform into a hero. But even then we only seize upon one desperate and unwelcome expedient to find it fails us; we must grasp another. As every other chance to prove Desdemona's innocence disappears, and every outside hope of a vindication breaks and fails, so we have to turn away even from Roderigo. When he fails us—when the mental and emotional revolution which made us turn to him as a possible hero proves unavailing—we are prepared for a last great effort, a still more desperate risk, and we invoke the testimony of the wedding sheets to prove Desdemona's innocence, wrong though the consummation must ever be.

As we love Desdemona's fidelity and devotion, as we pray for a disenthralment that will open the mind of Othello again to the truth, as we abhor Iago's fateful villainy and would give a world to see him foiled, we feel for the moment that we can ask for the testimony of the virginal wedding sheets and believe miscegenation can serve virtue's cause and become almost a virtue itself.

But if we consent, if at last, not through expected wifely joy, but through sacrificial love, Desdemona brings herself to such devotion, it is still true the transfigured and glorified act shall never be.

Even now, under all this storm and stress, and with miscegenation transformed as we could never have thought possible, Shakespeare will not consent to it—will not permit, under all these tremendous circumstances of extenuation and seeming

necessity, any such ruin of Desdemona's delicacy and wrecking of Othello's pledges as wretched commentary has supposed to occur in happy hours, with no better excuse or purpose than debased passion. Grand and glorious is it when we are brought to a consent extorted from us by tragic pathos and necessity to find the black Othello knows neither thought nor impulse of yielding—cannot so much as think of a consummation even when the bride says "Come." The early renunciation of the Moor, and the noble chasteness of his soul, are still so strong the wedding sheets are spread in vain for him; for he comes to Desdemona's bed, not responding to her preparation, but to enforce an awful expiation to supposed honor and justice.

No temptation, no soft opportunity, can swerve the sublime Moor one jot from what he owes to honor. Even as his magnificent will and resolution stood fast at the door of the nuptial chamber, when honor spoke only in a soft, subdued voice amid sounds of revelry, so it is only too sternly and awfully true that he will not fail or waver when summoned by a call more imperative than any he ever heard upon the field of battle.

Witness a heaven-moving question—a terrific answer—when Desdemona, awaking, finds Othello at her bedside for the first and only time:

*Des.* Will you come to bed, my lord?

*Oth.* Have you pray'd to-night, Desdemona?

Piteous the question, with maiden coyness all



blasted and lost in sorrow; appalling the answer, rendered in the stern and terrible chasteness of the Moor, who listens only to the supposed voice of honor, passes the bride's soft proffer as if hearing it not, remains untouched by Desdemona's preparation—demands her life, not her virginity.

So, by the steps of a lofty pledge, a grand renunciation, an illumined marriage, and the prospect of a transfigured connubium, we reach the immense crowning surprise of the virginal sacrifice pleadingly offered but unaccepted.

These great dramatic splendors are lost one and all in the degenerate modern theories of the play, formed since the playgoers and actors of the earlier centuries went to their graves, carrying the true epithalamic interpretation with them; leaving no record of it in print or writing, thinking it must ever be as self-apparent to others as it was to them. All the interpretations which now survive, differing immensely in details, suppose in common a consummated marriage, rob the play of its chief glory, and leave it, despite the indestructible beauty of the lines, dramatically a botch. The glorious changes showing the marriage now under this light, now under that; the wondrous delineation of quick-coming jealousy as a probable thing in the naturally non-jealous Moor; the preservation of Desdemona's delicacy and Othello's equally unstained pledges and honor; the marvelous transfiguration of the connubium as it appears in prospect, with the early pledge of continence awfully relumed at last—all these tragic splendors are utterly lost in the

common interpretations, and we are given instead a drama starting grandly with the poetic marriage and sinking heavily and quickly to base, unmotivated, horrible, disgusting naturalism.

Where the audacious genius of Shakespeare, surpassing itself in boldness, began the tragedy at a giddy and perilous height in the first act, and rose even from that level by successive marvels and wonders, the world has accepted a deformed theory which makes the play sink steadily from the opening, and groan through four mortal acts of ill-relieved animal jealousy and miscegenation.

Well calculated as is this grievous wrong upon Shakespeare to arouse indignation, we must remember that it has sprung from an innocent and natural, although most unfortunate, error. But natural as it may be to think the connubium a necessity of marriage between persons within the reproductive age and state, however strong force of habit may be in indicating a certain restraint and consideration as the conditions of an elevated marital relation, it was not so in this instance, for the reason that no uprightness of sentiment and no infrequency or delicacy of act could ever justify this marriage in proceeding to procreation. Always mindful of ends, and holding deepest reverence for the integrity of the family and family life, Shakespeare could not permit this marriage to pass on to consummation. However blameless the intent, only a halting and unworthy criticism, applying through blind force of habit a rule absolutely foreign to this marriage, could ever have prompted

and sustained the fearful misconception of a completed union.

Bearing in mind the pivotal point and distinction of an inter-racial marriage not softened into tolerance by moderation of act or tenderness and purity of accompanying motives, but elevated to the sublime by absolute renunciation, we have a glorious and consistent theory, which brings the whole plot out in harmony, and which, moreover, casts a side light of surpassing interest through the play into the personality of its author.

The other theories of the "Othello" now extant do not deserve mention in the same breath with this.

"Look here, upon this picture, and on this:

Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,

And batten on this moor?"

## CHAPTER XI.

### ELIZABETHAN SIDE LIGHTS.

DEEPLY significant is the relation of the old English miracle plays to the dramatic work of Shakespeare's time. It is as certain as anything in Shakespeare's life well can be that the old Coventry miracle or mystery play must have been familiar to him from childhood, and have supplied his first dramatic inspiration.\*

Written at first to teach the mysteries of Christianity, the work of priests and monks, the Coventry mystery, centuries old in Shakespeare's boyhood and with every feature ground into popular tradition and memory, had no more striking scenes or features than those which, with such realistic detail, depicted the unconsummated marriage of Joseph and Mary. Thus, while in Shakespeare's early formative period the epithalamium or bedding ballad of the ancients was blooming in freshness in English verse, suggesting approach to the bride chamber to catch its perfumes and feel its glow, over against it was set the old stage picture of nuptial joys inhibited and lost in the glory of a chaste-

\* Halliwell-Phillipps observes that, in an instance where the Mystery departed from the New Testament, Shakespeare's allusion follows the play. Cases are cited of men whose only knowledge of Christianity was from the play.



ness sanctified in marriage. The attempt to read the "Othello" without the light of the miracle play and the Elizabethan bride-song is the cause of one of the greatest perversions known to literature, and we can correct it only by going to the root of the error.

The Coventry miracle play, after portraying the fall of man and the prophecies of Christ, passed on and reached one of its points of greatest interest in representing the marriage of Joseph and Mary. Reserving a fuller consideration for a later stage, I ask attention at present to certain features of this scene as echoed and reproduced in other Elizabethan playwrights besides Shakespeare.

Immediately after the wedding Joseph greeted his bride thus:

"Mary, wife and maid, most gracious."

And Mary herself, in her rejoicing after the wedding, says:

"For now I am both maid and wife."

Pledging himself Mary's "warden and keeper" ever to be, Joseph desires the bishop to know

"That in bed we shall never meet."

And leaving Mary immediately after the wedding, he tells her, with notable precision, for nine months she shall see him not. Returning, perhaps a month sooner than he expected, Joseph has Mary's approaching motherhood properly explained, and sets out with her on the journey so

strangely interrupted when he left Mary in the stable and went to seek assistance.

When Joseph returns to the stable, expecting the birth of Jesus, and bringing with him the two midwives whose services proved so needless, he cried again:

“All hail, maiden and wife, I say.”

In a number of Elizabethan dramas which followed fast upon the Coventry miracle play, we find not only the conception of an unconsummated marriage repeated in various forms, but the language of Joseph and Mary is echoed often in literal terms. Melantus, in the “Maid’s Tragedy,” greets Aspatia, believing her to be only an hour married:

“Hail, maid and wife.”

So Zenocia, in the “Custom of the Country,” is described as “this virgin wife,” although some time married. And the same playwright and contemporary of Shakespeare who echoed the terms of the miracle play in this manner applied to another of his heroines a happy phrase—“maiden wife and wifely maid”—which fits equally the Mary of the old mystery drama, and, for a time at least, her successors in human sanctity, though not in divine favor, the Ordellas, the Evanthes, and the Desdemonas of the Elizabethan stage. I am not aware of any comparison of details between the miracle and Elizabethan plays having been carried out along this line, but Boas, Symonds, Halliwell-Phillipps, and others observe a striking general influence

cast from the dying religious drama on the work of Shakespeare and his fellows. Remarking on the survival of the miracle play until it "overlapped Hamlet," Boas thinks "it is something worthier than the love of picturesque anecdote that prompts us to accept the statement of biographers, supported by apparent reminiscences in his works, that Shakespeare in his boyhood had made the short pilgrimage from Stratford to Coventry to witness the famous Corpus Christi pageant." There or at Stratford he must have seen it many times; and what must have been the effect upon his sensitive and imaginative nature of the representation of the divine mystery of the Incarnation?

Absorbed above all else in the beauty and glory of womanhood, how must Shakespeare have been affected by the portrayal of the wifehood and motherhood of Mary? Nothing in the whole range of the miracle play could have aroused and stimulated such a nature more than the scene where the Virgin rapturously declares she feels within her womb "perfect man and perfect God." We shall not find in Shakespeare or other playwrights any adaptations of that scene, but the conception of arrested marriage and of a preserved virginity was taken up and treated by them from a purely human standpoint. And just here we reach a point where Shakespeare's variations and departures from the miracle play are as instructive as the points of resemblance. The subject is in some ways a painful one to the modern mind, which cannot understand how the

sublimities of religion and gross realism could be brought together in scenes designed to teach the truths of Christianity; but, as Symonds says, in speaking of this juxtaposition in early art, to the simple folk of those times it was both right and natural that "even the unclean should find a place in art and in religious mysteries." It seems to me we have in Shakespeare's treatment of Desdemona, when it is compared with the delineation of Mary's saved virginity in marriage, an instructive and invaluable proof of our great poet as the forerunner and leader of the sentiment which has so completely banished the unclean from religious observances, but the matter cannot be clearly presented without a closer reading of certain scenes of the miracle play than would ordinarily be either enlightening or agreeable. There can be no doubt that by the time Shakespeare heard the Coventry miracle play it had received gross interpolations from non-clerical hands. Hence the singular juxtaposition of the beautiful and majestic with the intolerable. Mary's prayer just before her marriage to Joseph,

"Gracious God, my maydenhed save  
Ever clene in chastyte,"

may be read reverently and without a feeling of undue stress on the physical token, and no one can question the simple beauty of the reference to the divine child before birth as "blomyd in a madenys body," or the devout address:

"In maydyns flesche thou art hede."



But if we proceed to the scenes where the virginity of Mary was first questioned, and then established, as one writer says, by proofs intended to penetrate the thickest skull, we cannot but appreciate the softening veil of the archaic spelling, which here may well be strictly preserved. After Joseph left Mary in the stable and went in search of assistance, he returned with the midwives only to find the miraculous birth accomplished. To the doubting women, who could not at first believe in a conjunction of virginity and motherhood, Mary said:

"I am clene mayde and pure virgyn,  
Tast with your hand yourself alon."

There is no doubt this request was acted out before old English audiences in the Coventry play, which was yet the purest of the religious dramas. Zelomy's speech in Old English runs thus:

"O myghtfulle God have mercy on me  
A merveyle that nevyr was herd befor  
Here openly I fele and se  
A fayr chylde of a maydon is borne  
And nedyth no waschyng as other dou  
Fful clene and pure forsooth is he;  
Without spot or any polucyon,  
His modyr nott hurte of virgynite!"

At the trial of Mary for breaking her vow of virginity a means of proof was employed which the profane dramatist could copy, as Fletcher did with notable success in the "Faithful Shepherdess"—the ordeal of flame. But the preceding accusations

were incredibly coarse. The subject can only be painful at this day, but we cannot appreciate the purity of Shakespeare's art, and the truth of his attitude toward the great Christian mystery, until we see the models before him for the disclosures of divinely unconsummate marriage and compare them with his way of exhibiting a purely human one.

The first detractor \* accused Mary of breaking her vow of maidenhood in marriage with Joseph, but the second charged a worse offense:

"A! Nay, nay, we; wers she hath him payd  
Sum fresche zouge galaunt she lovyth wel more,

And that doth greve the old man sore."

Not even this was the limit of coarseness, for we have to listen then to the first detractor again:

"Such a zouge damsel of bewte bright  
And of schap so comely also,  
Of hire talle oftetime be lyght  
And rygh tekyl undyr the too."

In an age that had endured such offense as this in a play devoted to religion, we could hardly expect to find a secular playwright treating a merely human instance of marriage arrested and virginity preserved with a delicacy so soft and refined that in subsequent centuries, not alive to issues and allusions centering about such unusual wedlock, the meaning has been altogether lost. But that is one

\* Iago's "put money in thy purse" is a literal reproduction of the language of another detractor in the mystery.

of the great lessons of the "Othello," one of the glories of Shakespeare to which the world should awake. The taste of his age rested upon Shakespeare at times, and he responded somewhat to the appetite for grossness; but when he came to picture a virgin wife in marriage, he felt that he was passing into an atmosphere of holiness and sanctity, and while aiming only at purposes of secular art, he caught the inspiration of the miracle, but purged away its vile realism and offense. When in his art a woman approached the sanctity of the miracle drama, grossness of allusion or method could not play upon her, but even the suggestion of her state had to be veiled.

It was quite different with other Elizabethan playwrights. Only by unusual and extraordinary effort do they rise to the conception of a marriage remaining unconsummate through a high motive, and when they do there is always some inconsistent display of grossness, some such juxtaposition of the platonic and the physical as in the miracle play. At first glance it may seem as if the "spiritual love" depicted in the "Knight of Malta" is an exception, and reaches close up to that of Othello and Desdemona. Oriana does indeed come for a moment almost up to the Shakespearean level when she pictures to her lover the beauties of a purely platonic love and asks him to

"Think on the legend which we two shall breed."

Refusing to kiss him, Oriana told the knight he did enamor her

" So far beyond a carnal earthly love  
My very soul dotes on thee and my spirits  
Do embrace thine; my mind doth thy mind kiss;  
And in this pure conjunction we enjoy  
A heavenlier pleasure than if bodies met;  
This, this is perfect love! the other short  
Yet languishing fruition. Every swain  
And sweating groom may clasp, but ours refined  
Two in ten ages cannot reach unto,  
Nor is our spiritual love a barren joy;  
For mark what blessed issue we'll beget,  
Dearer than children to posterity,  
A great example to men's continence  
And woman's chastity; that is a child  
More fair and comfortable than any heir!"

This is an uncommonly high expression of platonic love, but mark the incongruous features. There is no marriage in this instance, and Oriana's plea is that there should be none; the implication under the whole speech being that in marriage it would be impossible for her and the knight to keep their love wholly spiritual. And that was doubtless true. Oriana probably had good reason to decline a kiss from her lover, fearing as she did a risk to her platonic affection. Loving one man ideally, she was living in full marriage with another. And the knight himself, who assented to the pledge of spiritual affection, had shortly before offered illicit advances to one of the waiting-women of his lady love. Such is the incongruous coarseness, not of side scenes or of contrasting characters, but of the persons themselves who are joined in "spiritual love." There is some advance here



over the crude suggestions of the miracle play, but it is not great.

The allusions of Beaumont and Fletcher to the loss of virginity show a marked improvement on the coarseness of the old miracle plays, but the complaint of Coleridge that the women of the two immortally joined playwrights "value their chastity as a material thing, not as an act and state of being" is only too well founded. Allowance can be made for Lucina thinking her chastity could be destroyed by violence against her will, but in many other cases female virtue is offensively paraded as somatic merely.

Oriana was a virtuous wife properly wedded, yet she thought that to a second husband, even though she loved him devotedly, she could only be a woman

"That has been once sold, us'd, and lost her show!  
I am a garment worn, a vessel crack'd,  
A zone untied, a lily trod upon,  
A forgotten flower cropt by another's hand,  
My color sullied and my odor changed."

As Oriana is speaking of her prospective state as a widow, after a period of lawful wedded life with a proper husband, and when contemplating a second marriage, it is plain she thinks of virginity chiefly as a material thing.

Zenocia, in the "Custom of the Country," says that to Arnolfo "in sacred vow I have given this body," and yet, thinking of involuntary relation with another, she says:

“ . . . The purest springs  
When they are courted by lascivious land floods  
Their maiden pureness and their coolness perish ;  
And though they purge again to their first beauty  
The sweetness of their taste is clear departed.”

Beaumont departs at times from the representation of virginity as a physical rather than a moral state; Fletcher never does. Nor do many other Elizabethan playwrights. They were not yet emancipated, as Shakespeare was, from the coarseness of the old miracle play, with its incredible physical proof of maidenhood as a physical thing. His immense advance in delicacy of delineation cannot be understood until his work is compared on this point specifically with the method of the religious plays.

Representing maiden virtue as physical, the Elizabethan playwrights found it difficult to conceive of an unconsummated marriage unless the husband suffered some bodily restraint, or was animated by dislike of his wife and preference for someone else. Along such lines they could and did deal with arrested marriage, but their preference was to stay the bridegroom temporarily, so they could rejoice and make merry over his tantalization. The restraint of the husband is physical, not mental—much the same as that of Joseph in the miracle play, who was caused to tremble with the weakness of age in order to explain his reserve, and then, to make sure, was kept away from home and from his wife for precisely three-fourths of a year after his wedding day. Almost always in the

Elizabethan drama the restraint of the husband was limited in time, suggestive rather than heroic—the result of some wile or mischance, not a behest of honor.

Thus Thierry's inhibition was purely physical—a drink prepared to paralyze somatic functions,

“ Which, given unto him on the bridal night,  
 Shall for five days so rob his faculties  
 Of all ability to pay that duty  
 Which new-made wives expect, that she shall swear  
 She is not matched to a man.”

The profane dramatists generally picture the restraint of the bridegroom as involuntary. Valerio, just wedded and preparing for his nuptials, is told:

“ If thou dost offer to touch Evanthé's body  
 Beyond a kiss, though thou art married to her  
 And lawfully, as thou think'st may'st enjoy her,  
 That minute she shall die.”

In the “Faithful Friends” the familiar Elizabethan concept of an unconsummated marriage is touched in this rude fashion in a colloquy between the lonely, waiting bride and her waiting-woman shortly after the wedding ceremony:

*Flavia.* This marriage spoils us all;  
 When you were a maid——

*Phi.* A maid, Flavia !

*Flavia.* I mean uncoupled, madam ; you are a maid now,  
 but for necessity, against your will.

In Wilkins' “Enforced Marriage,” produced probably a little before the “Othello,” a strange change is rung. Throughout the main part of the

drama Scarborough's expressions seem to indicate beyond question an unconsummated marriage: "She that I am married to, but not my wife"; "False woman, not my wife though married to me." Katherine's own speeches declare the same:

"Though married I am reputed no wife."

The *dénouement* proves, however, that the resolution not to live with the enforced wife prevailed not from the time of the wedding, but from the death of the broken-hearted and unwed love, Clare. The climax shows the marriage had been consummated, and Scarborough is brought finally to acknowledge it. So do we find the playwrights persistently displaying husbands incapable of maintaining a renunciation or of doing so only through physical necessity, or because of some other favorite being granted the place the wife should have. These marital heroes are all cast in the mold of the Joseph of the miracle, who had to have physical debility put upon him, and then be kept from home to cause his abstention to seem probable. There are some exceptions to these pictures of manly chasteness as altogether untrustworthy, and one of considerable force may be found in the Paradine of Sir William Davenant's tragedy of "Albovine."

That Davenant was a natural son of Shakespeare is probably only green-room gossip, but the younger William was no doubt a great favorite with the older, and we may well believe the story of his running eagerly from school to meet Shakespeare when he came to the Crown tavern. When



in after life Davenant "seemed content to be thought Shakespeare's son" he probably meant it in the sense of being a pupil and follower of his great master. At any rate, that is what Davenant was, and in his tragedy of "Albovine" we have a most significant side light for the "Othello." Several writers have noticed in this play the singular repetition of phrases from the "Othello," but the resemblance goes much further than that, although it does not extend to the general plot. There is no conflict of race or color between the wedded lovers, but there is one that arrests the marriage immediately after the ceremony and keeps it unconsummated until death, the dramatic lifetime of the pair being abbreviated, however, almost as much as in the "Othello." Moreover, the juxtaposition of scenes of hymeneal suggestion and of arrested marriage is even more striking than in the "Othello"; for Davenant presents a double marriage, and then carries one bridegroom on to the nuptial chamber, while the gates of bliss close forever against the other just as his hand is put upon the latch. "No masks, no epithalamium now," for Albovine. Paradine disappears with Valdaura amid denotements plainer than any call for wedding sheets or other delicate intimations, and is introduced to us next morning amid "mirth and laughter" over his time of rising and like jokes, then thought to fit the nuptial occasion.

It was a "dire abstinence" imposed by his bride which Albovine suffered, not a voluntary one like Othello's; but still we have in this play, in the char-

acter of Paradine, a spirit approaching that of the Moor, and in notable contrast with the work of most of the old playwrights. Paradine speaks the truth of his own heart to his beloved and revered Valdaura:

“Not the mountain ice,  
Congeal'd to crystal, is so frosty chaste  
As thy victorious soul, which conquers man  
And man's proud tyrant-passion.”

This is worthy Othello himself, and might have been spoken by him to Desdemona, were it not Shakespeare's inflexible rule to keep her delicacy removed from any such direct allusion to the secrets of her inner life. Turning to the other heroine in Davenant's play, we find Rhodolinda's motive in arresting the marriage and holding her husband in permanent exclusion was one that appeals to our sympathies. She was as willing a bride as Valdaura, and, although not a Lombard, fully expected to obey

“The Lombard custom, whose virgins never vow  
A continence the nuptial night.”

Not even for that brief time did Rhodolinda expect to stay the payment of her conjugal debt, but when, in drinking the toasts after the wedding ceremony, the bridegroom offered foul dishonor to the memory of her dead father, she justly determined to arrest the marriage at once, and hold Albovine in an exclusion that should last as long as life. But while Rhodolinda's motive, and the manly chasteness of Paradine, rise above the common

level of the old playwrights and seem to approach the "Othello," Davenant soon falls back. Rhodolinda, after the righteous tribute to her father, sinks all regard for womanly virtue in her hunger for revenge. Paradine's virtue is not abandoned, but the playwright puts him in a sorry plight by having Rhodolinda obtain access to his apartment by personating his wife, and then having him whimper over the loss of his "chaste honor." So, generally, in the old plays the attempt to represent manly chasteness and arrested marriage is far below the lofty one of Shakespeare.

Among other plays, written for the same generation that first witnessed the "Othello," which deal with marriages kept unconsummate for a greater or less time, are the "Maid's Tragedy," the "Custom of the Country," the "Sea Voyage," the "Double Marriage," the "Wife for a Month," "Thierry and Theodoret," and "A Maidenhead Well Lost," but they may be searched in vain for a marital renunciation noble alike in motive and execution. It is not until we return to Shakespeare that we find the love Oriana spoke of as beyond the attainment of more than two in ten ages. Here we have the arrested marriage of the miracle rendered purely human, glorified with voluntary chasteness and renunciation, and carried to a height which seems almost too much for mortal reach. The lesser playwrights could not follow this flight wherein a lofty renunciation aims to raise an intermarriage above the vexations of opposing blood and color. They brought on the stage brides and

bridegrooms of the same race, and where they stayed the union it was through an inglorious motive, or only temporarily with the obstacle interposed as an obstruction in a stream which may increase the strength and noise of the current.

Massinger's "Bondman" comes perhaps as near the "Othello" in the representation of supersensuous love as any play of that time. Cleora repeats almost the exact language of Desdemona: "I love Marulla's fair mind, not his person." She is a lady of high station, and he is supposed to be a base slave, but is not of a different color. His affection for her appears at times much like the "humble love" Othello had for Desdemona, since he says he hopes for nothing beyond a touch of her hand. Bridling all base impulse, Marulla cherished a love which impressed Cleora as of the kind that "wing great minds to heaven"; and Timoleon expresses wonder that

" . . . a slave should be  
The owner of a temperance which this age  
Can hardly parallel in freeborn lords  
Or kings proud of their purple."

This is an unmistakable paraphrase or echo of Othello, but it is not maintained steadily at the same height. Marulla was so lauded simply because, having the woman he loved absolutely in his power, in the license of a city's fall, he defended her honor from others and respected it himself. Afterwards he proves to have been a man of high degree in disguise, and eventually he marries the



lady, no further renunciation being needed or required. This is much below the denial of Othello, although Marulla's temptation may be thought stronger in one sense, since he knew all the time he was really a fit companion for Cleora, and not debarred by the inhibition of race and the baseness of hybrid offspring, which to Othello was a forbidding and insurmountable barrier to a consummated marriage and second only to the unpardonable wrong to innocent and mistaken Desdemona. No such restraints as these rested upon Marulla, and he may have believed all the while his denial was only temporary.

While the early stage was busy with pictures of arrested marriage ranging from the ignoble to the grand, there could hardly fail to be an echo in real life. We find it in the marriage of the Countess of Essex, while Shakespeare was still in London. "A daughter of the proudest family of the English nobility," says Macaulay, "formed the resolution so to live with the husband to whom she was about to be married that she might boast herself married to him only in name." And this determination, which was actually carried out in unconsummated marriage for years, dates from 1609—probably four years after the "Othello" was first produced. So, too, had the idea of arrested fruition been dealt with in "All's Well" and "Measure for Measure." Wilkins' "Enforced Marriage," where the union seemed one of non-consummation up to the *dénouement*, had been a favorite on the stage for several years when the Countess of Essex introduced the

device of the dramatists into the actual life of English society and successfully withheld her husband. It can hardly be thought Frances Howard got her suggestion from this piece or a tradition of the miracle play, or from seeing or hearing of Desdemona's nuptials; for her motive was not chasteness, only a desire to save herself from an unacceptable husband and for an unlawful lover alone. I cite the incident merely as one of those "subtle links" Macaulay speaks of between the dramatic literature of an age and its actual occurrences.

We may believe few of her sex sought to follow the Countess of Essex in real life, but in fiction the Elizabethans heard so much of love as ingloriously incomplete or sentimental that within ten years after the death of Shakespeare it became an object of satire; as in the "Mad Lover," where true affection is mockingly said not to begin until death relieves us of our flesh and earthly wedlock is declared a coarse expedient to keep the world peopled.

A full view of Elizabethan literature will supply ample indications that when Shakespeare wrote the "Othello" he revived a tradition of chivalry, cast upon it a dying but resplendent light of the miracle play, bodying forth to his generation a conception which took strong hold upon it, standing over against the gross ideas of love between men and women as one extreme produced by the other. Carried on to affectation and fantastic manifestations, the idea of platonic love became soon after Shakespeare's death a thing for satire. Weber,

early in the present century, in his prefatory note to the "Mad Lover," which was first produced about the time of Shakespeare's death, says "the dialogue between Memnon and Siphax is an admirable banter on the absurd affectation of platonic attachment so fashionable in Fletcher's days and, in a somewhat altered shape, revived in the sentimental comedies of our own." Unable to paint platonic love in the glorious colors Shakespeare used in the "Othello," and yet unable to get away from the spell which he cast upon his time in this play, other poets and dramatists as a rule could only parody it and grow fantastically sentimental. But though he had no true followers, and his lofty conception was repeated only in feeble and unworthy echoes, it was a surpassing achievement to burn the thought of supersensuous affection into the mind of an age which was naturally gross; for it cannot be doubted that the revival of the doctrine of platonic love in Shakespeare's time was inspired by his "Othello." Since thought gross, disjointed, crude, the story of Othello and Desdemona is a thing ensky'd and sainted that sings at heaven's gates. Although Shakespeare's generation was hardly worthy the play, the better class was exceptionally well qualified to catch the meaning from delicate hymeneal strokes, and the effect on them was evident. Black men began to be thought of as noble, not irredeemably base. A year after the production of the "Othello" Ben Jonson wrote a masque in which the complexion assigned to "the blackest nation in the world" was

held not incompatible with beauty and honor, and in acting it the ladies of the court painted their arms and faces an ebon hue; and when Fletcher, years later, caused Oriana to appeal to her lover to preserve an abstinent and purely spiritual affection for the sake of a high legend for future ages, the playwright knew in truth his friend and master had already done that in the tale of "the orient pearl joined to the sooty Moor."

Shakespeare never moved the Elizabethan heart more strongly than with this play. Others dealt falteringly or palteringly with platonic love; he was here most powerful, thrilling, and fearsome. Horrified at first with Desdemona apparently devoted to a proposed miscegenation and sent

- "To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor,"

—which would have been final ruin to her and the drama,—the Elizabethans hung through five acts on a lightly touched hope and found at last the dainty maid had been held ever in the sanctified love of the great barbarian.



## CHAPTER XII.

### OTHELLO'S CHARACTER AND CAREER.

I HAVE already followed in detail the revelations of the platonic marriage as they support and develop the action, but it remains to apply another test and inquire whether this view will be in harmony with the characterization, more particularly that of Othello, who, in the accepted interpretations, is regarded as having something of the beast or savage yet in him. No writer has labored more determinedly than Turnbull to whiten Othello to render him a fit husband for Desdemona, and then, with singular inconsistency, to darken him heavily to account logically for his jealousy and murder of his wife. To achieve the first purpose "all the beauty and dignity of conjugal faith" are ascribed to Othello's relation to Desdemona; to attain the second we are told there was lurking all the time in the Moor "the distrust, suspicion, and mean cunning of the savage." And the utter physical breakdown of Othello is attributed not to the intolerable mental and physical strain of a false life in marriage, but to a neurotic temperament and epilepsy, although the Moor's seizure is physically not of that kind. It is indispensable to the new interpretation consistently to prove Othello a man of such character and training to make him capable of

the high idealism of the platonic marriage, for the difficulty of assuming non-somatic relations lies primarily with him; and if he is justified, Desdemona will of necessity share in the vindication, whether she desired it or not.

Usually Shakespeare deals with the lives of his characters in any detail only from the time they appear in the drama, but he has been at pains to impress us with the entire past career of Othello from childhood. The first act, so fully devoted to the past of Desdemona and the Moor, is a unique thing in Shakespeare. The Moor told the Senate since his "arms had seven years' pith" he had been engaged in constant military service until a short time before, when he came to Venice. It is clear his boyhood and early manhood were passed in army life, wholly removed from the associations of female kindred, or indeed good women of any kind, except as such influence may have come to him as a memory of the past of his childhood or as a possible glimpse of the future. Naturally such an experience would promote hardness of character, but we are soon made to see that Othello was toughened only in body and soldierly qualities, being one who came from the trials and temptations of such a career with the true gold of a noble nature tested and proved by fire. He had a brother who had served with him and fallen in the wars, puffed from his arm when the cannon blew his ranks into the air. The fact of the handkerchief being given to Othello implies he was a favorite son, or at least the one with the qualities of mind and heart best

fitting him to be the custodian of the precious family token. The care with which he preserved and guarded it through all the tumult and changes of his stormy, unsettled life—through battles and sieges, sale into slavery and redemption thence—denotes his belief that there was “magic in the web of it,” and prepares us for the injunction he laid upon Desdemona when at last he gave the antique token to her—“Make it a darling like your precious eye.” The handkercher had all the associations of the good mother in the past, and had been presented to him to give to the bride of the future: it typified all his memory recalled and all his hopes prefigured of pure womanhood. Emilia tells us Desdemona had been so well impressed with the sacred character of the handkerchief, even before any trouble arose over it,

“That she reserves it evermore about her  
To kiss and talk to.”\*

Iago, too, who had served long with Othello in the army, and who had studied him with the penetration of a subtle villain, well knew the sacred meaning borne by the handkercher. When he came to plot the ruin of Othello after the marriage,

\*The incident of the handkerchief, while copied by Shakespeare from Cinthio, is wonderfully improved and recreated. In Cinthio, the handkercher is simply a handsome one with no other associations than as a gift by the Moor to Desdemona. Giving the token a history and investing it with sacred meanings, Shakespeare throws a flood of light upon the character of the man who so valued and cherished it.

by awakening jealousy of Desdemona, he believed nothing could serve his purpose so effectually as to create a suspicion of the antique token receiving dishonor from her hands. The surest way to throw the mind of Othello from its accustomed calm and care was to awaken a suspicion of dishonor to the sacred talisman which came from his mother and had become the symbol of all that was sacred in womanhood. Hence the eagerness of Iago to get possession of the sacred token. Emilia afterward says:

“ For often with a solemn earnestness,  
More than indeed belonged to such a trifle,  
He begg'd of me to steal it.”

Again, in the fearful climax of the last act, Desdemona is told her worst of crimes is not that against Othello himself so much as the one against the handkerchief of sacred memories. The shame of shames of which she was guilty was this:

“ That handkerchief which I so lov'd and gave thee  
Thou gav'st to Cassio.”

In this sacred value which he put on the handkerchief, we remark not only why dishonor to it should work him to fury, but, looking farther back, we have disclosed to view the character of the man who had saved such a relic through a wild and boisterous career as something connecting him with the mother of past memory and the bride of the future, if such a one there was to be. This antique token, rich in associations, must have been all the more precious to Othello since he had scarcely



anything else in his life freighted with the influence or memories pertaining to good women. Taken from his native land in childhood and serving ever after in the armies of Europe, he could know nothing of women of his own clime and complexion, while those of European blood were doubly removed from him, by distance and by race. In this peculiar isolation good women became ideals rather than realities to Othello, but his faith in them was none the less pronounced. This peculiar life, with its distant removal from the influence of good women, must be considered in the light of the fact of the base women who followed European armies being ever in sight. Situated as Othello was, one of two things became inevitable: the impulse of sex had to be idealized and carried to poetic heights, or it must inevitably have sunk to the base. With women of his own race far away in heathendom, cut off from virtuous ones of white blood by his alien color and race, and yet with the wantons of the camp about him, no relations of an ordinary nature were possible in Othello's case; the impulse of sex had to be far up in the sphere of idealism and fancy or lower on the plane of the baser passion.

I pause here to remark again the surpassing importance of this play as a manifestation of the man Shakespeare in his study of the grand passion. What must have been the final faith of Shakespeare in human nature when, after a lifetime spent with the base and sinful surroundings of the Elizabethan playhouse ever in sight and touch, he could

draw such a picture of superiority to sensuous attraction as in Othello! Previously his plots and characters had seemed to reflect his painful and repellent surroundings to the point of despair over what Wendell describes as the "vast evil mystery of sexual love" in its power over men. Yet in this play, written toward the close of his career, we have him sketching a man removed from any probability of legitimate marriage and surrounded by base temptation only to triumph over it with visions of love and womanhood enshrined in lofty idealism. We might not wonder so much at this if Othello had not been so far removed from good women or so long surrounded by the base. Evidently Shakespeare intended to place the Moor where he had himself been placed—as one saturated with a knowledge of the female impurity about him, and yet rising superior to the debasing influence. Not that Othello is to be taken for a saint or a god. Instead, he gives a more forcible example from being presented as one who had fallen at some distant point in his youth, unknown seemingly to anyone but himself and the other party to the guilt, but, "confessing the vices of his blood," had become thereafter a convert to Christianity and had led a white life in strange contrast with the men about him. It may well be that this noble struggle out of the toils, and triumphant superiority to an atmosphere of unceasing debasement and temptation, voices Shakespeare's own rise above the life which so long surrounded him.

At the time Othello met Desdemona we must

accept him as a man who, if he had not an early youth as spotless as Joseph's, had yet nobly recovered himself, had been disciplined by repentance, and who for a prolonged period had led a life white in contrast with his surroundings, and whose appreciation of good women was heightened by the revolt and loathing with which he had turned from the opposite. He met the wives and daughters of officers when they visited the camps or when he went to Venice, but had long abandoned any visions he may have had in youth of a wife of the superior race with which his fortunes were cast, and had come to look upon his bachelor life or "unhoused condition" as something not merely inevitable, but for him the only fit and proper one. Such was the man Brabantio invited to his house and presented to his daughter.

Welcomed in Venice with high social honor, and introduced to the matrons and maids of a cultivated society, Othello could have had no idea of ever attaining a position of family in those circles where he was already a social lion. Notwithstanding the attention he received, and the high position he had won as commander of the Venetian army, Othello realized what the barrier of race meant, and was so modest as to hold an exaggerated sense of his personal deficiencies. "Rude am I in speech." When before the Senate it was only in his own opinion "a round unvarnished tale" he could deliver, although in fact it was a perfect thing and charmed every ear. Later he laments his lack of the attractions of conversation which he thinks pe-

culiar to effeminate men. Thinking himself cut off from the love of woman and position of family in the only society and the only race where he could desire them, there came to Othello a change as swift and complete as any that ever swept over his ranks in time of battle. With slight warning or preparation he was made to know that the speech he thought so rude sounded sweeter in the ears of the fairest daughter of Venice than any phrase of love she had heard from her own countrymen; that his tale of adventure was more entrancing to fair Desdemona than any she listened to from the high-born youth of Venice, and she was eager to scale the barriers of race and color to meet the one whom she knew to be her soul's love.

Notwithstanding Desdemona's advances, Othello believed her love was as purely ideal in character as his own. Otherwise he would have appreciated at once the ill-assorted nature of a marriage with a woman of superior race, for at his age he would appreciate fully the impossibility of such a union proceeding properly to family ends and introducing hybrid children to the circle of Venetian society in which Desdemona belonged. A white wife and children of her blood and his could only exist in dreams. Othello was not a thorough man of the world, but he understood this; and he knew the different phases of attraction and could distinguish between them as Desdemona could not. She simply felt that she loved Othello, and did not stop to ask whether the affection was different from what should be experienced at the entrance to mar-



riage or was of such a nature as could never be consummated in matrimony. She followed her impulses without questioning them. Othello did that too in a degree, but not so blindly as Desdemona. A man of his age, character, and experience would certainly consider his situation and the meaning of marriage far enough to realize that as between them it must be of the heart and the soul, but could never pass beyond such bounds to somatic completion. He then hoped or believed that Desdemona would be supremely content to have it so; he had perfect faith he could live permanently in that supersensuous elevation.

Accustomed as the Elizabethans were to look forward at once from the wedding to the appearance of offspring as the most desired and only adequate end, they could only think it most natural Othello should consider that result, and, if true to a noble nature, would realize that his love for Desdemona could not properly go on to consummation. Keenly aroused and interested in the black man, whom they had regarded at first with disgust, they gave a delighted ear as he told the Senate—in a strain so like Sir Philip Sidney's renunciation of "foul Cupid," in a popular epithalamy of the time—that the passions of youth were dead in him, and those of manhood absolutely controlled.

Othello's lifelong dreams of womanhood were summed up in Desdemona, and when he gave her the sacred token which came from his mother she became the impersonation of all the lovely feminine qualities he had carried in his memory as coming

from the past as well as of all those which fancy had painted in the future. If Desdemona idealized him, he made an apotheosis of her. She became the embodiment of all that was beautiful and worshipful. It has been observed by many writers that Othello has little of the lover in his conduct, but the remark should be limited to the self-desire of a lover. He had a fervent love of Desdemona, and the quality of it should not be questioned because it was so completely free of selfishness or self-desire as to seem more like that of a father than a lover or husband. Another remark widely quoted is that Othello was not actuated by jealousy in the true sense of the term. Ever since Coleridge made this observation it has met general concurrence, but neither Coleridge nor those who quote him with approval have explained why they can say it was not jealousy that moved Othello. It was not personal jealousy—not the fear of losing to another what he would save for his own selfish gratification—that wrung the soul of the Moor, but a double agony over the betrayal of his faith and the ruin of his ideals joined for one awful hour to a thirst for vengeance; but with this latter rage quickly subsiding into a demand for Desdemona's death as an expiation to holy justice.

The tropical passion which rose in Othello when he lost faith in Desdemona came like the terrific recoil and reaction of a tornado following an uneasy and unnatural calm. His rage is a tremendous reversal and reaction from the humility in which his married life began. After his awful

wrath is started he tells Iago it shall "ne'er ebb to humble love" again. That expression—humble love—was finely chosen to characterize his early affection for Desdemona before suspicion came over him. His love was humble indeed; too conscious of his own racial inferiority to attain any assured sense of equality and safety. His efforts to reassure himself were pitiful. It is against all previous interpretations, but I insist Othello was ill at ease from the beginning; that beneath the calm exterior Shakespeare intended us to see a restless feeling stirring from the outset; and that the final revolt from Desdemona was a growth from this germ, not an instantaneous and unaccountable collapse.

Othello was a man of a fine sense of propriety and honor, and with his regard for appearances could not have felt entirely satisfied when he stole away the old man's daughter. For the general of the army to disturb the decorum of a senator's family, and vex in this way that high Venetian society which had honored him, was a serious matter, and Othello must have had early misgivings in regard to it. We note Othello's sense of propriety in such incidents as his fine deference to the Senate, his desire for accommodation for Desdemona suited to her station and breeding, and his severe arraignment "for Christian shame" of the men engaged in the night brawl. Cassio hardly dared hope for pardon from Othello after showing himself "so indiscreet an officer." A man so prudent and almost punctilious in his bearing could

not have taken a senator's daughter away in elopement without some misgivings arising soon after, if not at the time. His anxiety is betrayed in his efforts at reassurance. At his first appearance we find him laying stress upon the legality of his marriage title as something to atone for its social irregularity; intimating also that the purity of his intent, or "perfect soul," must save it from any taint of inter-racial grossness. Almost immediately, however, he has to face the scurvy and provoking charges of Brabantio, who declares the marriage a thing of horror into which Desdemona could have been led only by witchcraft or the use of drugs to arouse unnatural appetite. Such accusations must have cut Othello to the quick; and it is evident, notwithstanding the momentary flush of confidence which followed his victory before the Senate, he could not keep away the doubt arising from the unnaturalness of the marriage, but secretly or half-consciously at the core of his heart he feared Brabantio might have understood the ultimate feeling and state of heart in which Desdemona would settle better than did the maiden herself.

A man of Othello's age and character could not but fear that the young girl's romantic sentiments might have swept her into a marriage from which she would recoil in time. At first Othello reassured himself with the belief of the poetic relations of the marriage forever saving it from any grossness offensive to Desdemona or calculated to taint her love, but it was inevitable that fears should attack him from an opposite direction. Othello's logic



stopped short of the truth when he argued a cure for the unnaturalness of the marriage through the preservation of platonic relations. The union was still unnatural. A mere negative saving or avoidance of offense to Desdemona could not supply the lack of culmination and consummation necessary in the order of nature to the perfection of marital love. Just as Othello strove to get into the clouds, he was certain to lose any secure footing on earth.

In all Shakespeare's studies and developments of purified yet purely human love there is nothing at once more beautiful and deeply pathetic than the representation it gets in this play. Why should not so pure and noble a purpose as possessed Othello have been rewarded with success? Must we understand that love in marriage can never be from the first purely spiritual and survive? Shakespeare does not make that assertion, but he implies some fatal lack in the relations of Othello and Desdemona, and it adds wonderfully to the pathos of their situation that they could not succeed when their motives were so high. At any rate, Othello's early uneasiness over the mere social irregularity of a marriage by elopement grows steadily into graver doubts and fears, despite his efforts to hide the fact from himself and despite occasional moments of reassurance. His superabundant joy on meeting Desdemona at Cyprus is really pathetic. That she should have survived the ocean storm was indeed a matter for rejoicing; but that Othello should find the fact of no change in her love after a separation of two weeks some-

thing to fill his soul with a happiness almost too great for earth, was painfully significant. But Othello was right; it was too much of joy; it could not last. Othello could not look at his black hand or catch his face in a mirror without quailing; without fearing that Desdemona's continued fidelity to him would be too good to be true. Simply because of Othello's consciousness of the marriage being an unnatural one whether consummated or not, and as much against nature one way as the other, he was in a state of mind to absorb the poison of Iago's insinuations without power to make any considerable resistance to them. At first he thought non-consummation the safety of the marriage; afterward feared that very thing as a lack which would cause Desdemona to turn to a man more fit in race and blood. "Haply for I am black." But even before the first whisperings of the temptation scene by Iago the self-engendered doubts of the Moor were telling on him. Subjected to the tests of dramatic art, the extreme severity of the punishment visited by Othello on the reveler caught in the night brawl can receive but one interpretation. That was an occasion with full liberty of feasting, when the restraints of military life were released for a joyous celebration, and yet Othello, "the man whom passion could not shake," manifests extreme severity, admits his blood is getting the upper hand of his judgment, and overwhelms his most trusted friend with disgrace and ruin. That means simply that the Moor was not himself; that the strain of his situation was telling

upon him powerfully before the beginning of the temptation scene. At the earlier period of the action, and before Iago's first whisper could have had any effect, we have that significant outburst over Desdemona:

“Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,  
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,  
Chaos is come again.”

Readers who will consent that Shakespeare used both light and shade, will not fail to see the significance of this speech. Johnson says the meaning is: “When my love is for a moment suspended by suspicion I have nothing in my mind but discord, tumult, perturbation, and confusion.” The feeling undoubtedly is that described, but at that time it could not come from actual suspicion. There had been nothing so far to warrant or excite suspicion; the fears that have arisen self-engendered in Othello's mind are simply as to whether Desdemona can continue permanently happy and content as his wife. At times Othello has a feeling of loving trust and confidence in the platonic marriage that satisfies, but it gives way to returning anxiety—chaos will come again. But up to this point Othello assuredly has no suspicion of misconduct in Desdemona. Iago has not yet hissed.

The great difficulty with the commentators in endeavoring to account for the suddenness of Othello's turn to jealousy, and his quick response to Iago's poison, has been in not seeing how his

mind was working toward such a state from the opening scene. They have insisted on regarding Othello as in enjoyment of the most perfect, unclouded, complete wedded happiness, so that the misery of his turn to jealousy may be more dreadful in comparison, but that leaves the change too sudden to be rational and the string of incidents denoting an undercurrent of anxiety in the mind of the Moor from the first without any explanation. Professor Wilson says if we are to have a beautiful palace wrecked by an earthquake we must first see it standing in perfected beauty, but this cannot apply to Othello, for his wedded love was not capable of full development, as he well knew. The pathos lies there—in what never was to be, not in the ruin of a perfected love. Where bride and groom are of the same race the beautiful idealism of early affection passes by natural efflorescence into perfected marital affection, but that could not be in this case. Professor Wilson's theory, moreover, utterly fails to give the "tragic fault."

If Othello's love was of such a nature that it could be built up to perfection, why should it have been ruined? Would that be artistic drama worthy Shakespeare or any other writer capable of a true romantic tragedy? Where, then, would be the tragic principle working against the marriage from the beginning? Depend upon it, the "Othello" was not wrought out on any such lines of crudity. Instead we see a germ of anxiety in the mind of Othello when he first stepped upon the stage. In its incipency his doubt was only as to the inde-



corum of a runaway match between himself and the daughter of a senator. This fear grew silently but steadily, and soon took on a new and graver character. He began to doubt whether the inoffensive platonic relations could save a marriage which, even when regarded from that standpoint, was still against nature. Even during that brief hour when all outer circumstances seemed favorable to his peace, this man of serene self-poise and splendid self-discipline betrays beneath the calm exterior an uneasiness which had grown into ominous strength before Iago more than began to feel his way. No wonder, then, the temptation scene swept him so quickly from his feet. The ground was all ready for Iago when he began.

Left to himself, Othello could not have escaped anxiety and doubt of the marriage being prosperous and happy, but he never would have suspected Desdemona. He feared she had misunderstood herself, and was carried into a marriage in which she could not be permanently happy, not that she could be guilty or corrupt. A man of Othello's tender conscience and fine sense of honor and propriety could not have avoided these doubts and fears by any possible effort. Pity him we must, but we cannot deny that Othello deserved this uneasiness. The marriage was essentially wrong, and he knew it. A young girl might be deceived about it and have thought the platonic idealism could endure prosperously through life, but a man of Othello's years should have known that wedlock has to do not merely with the sentiments of the

parties, but with the appearances it presents to the world, and cannot safely give offense to society. We cannot deny that fortune did owe a fall to the "thick lips," and for the very reason of the thick lips. Roderigo was only reasonable when he predicted the Moor's fall for trying to "carry 't thus" with a high hand, although we know at heart he was humble and anxious enough about the marriage. His act, however, was one against certain obvious proprieties, essentially one of presumption, and, as he soon felt in his own conscience, was destined to a bad ending. Othello's fate is the result of his own error, but it comes through motives which command our sympathy, and just there we have the perfection of tragic art. Yet this grand plot has been hidden for centuries behind a false interpretation supplying discord and sensualism where the great dramatist put the beauty and woe of consummate tragedy.

When Iago began to rub Othello's anxious fears of the marriage into positive suspicions of Desdemona, the Moor quickly changed from a state of "humble love" into one of an indignation which was as righteous to him as it is terrible to us. The transition is one of the finest things in tragedy. His wrath over betrayal is the more intense because his love had been humble and lowly, drawing fears and anxieties only from his own weak merits. To find that he had been humbling himself in this spirit before one of the basest creatures of earth or hell—a wanton woman—tore his soul with agony, but it was not a fury that had anything in common

with sensual jealousy. The wrong done was not one to his proper delights, but to honor. His fury rose, not over his own loss, for he had "not wanted what was stolen," but that another should obtain wrongfully and lasciviously that which he himself had deemed too sacred even for a husband, under the sanctity of marriage. Even then he disclosed no wounded selfishness, no injured self-desire. Dowden comes close to the truth when he says the passion of Othello is "rather the agony of being compelled to hate that which he supremely loved."

It was indeed even more than that—the surpassing agony of having his faith in woman and womanhood utterly cast down and ruined.

Until the temptation by Iago, the Moor had believed—truthfully enough—that Desdemona was content with his marital absence because she believed it only temporary. He knew hers was the devoted love of a woman who could not be satisfied ultimately without an absolute consecration of herself to wifehood and maternity. Facing the prospect of a cruel disillusionment of his bride or a worse wrong upon her by full acceptance in marriage, the Moor was thrust by his unfortunate wedding into a mental struggle which grew worse with every passing hour. He had encountered and averted the trial of the nuptial celebration, but he could not hope to repeat that fortunate yet unhappy escape often. Wrestling with this insoluble problem, Othello, to cite his own marvelously apt term, was indeed "wrought," and worked to such a pitch that at the time of the joyous jubilee

his former self-poise had given way to a nervous tension and anxiety which he himself confessed had clouded or "collied" his judgment. It was not until Othello was thus harassed, worn, and prepared for the tempter that Iago was permitted to work upon him. It was not the noble Moor in his naturally strong confidence and trust, but the anxious and worried Othello, struggling with a problem too great for solution, who became an easy and yet pitiable victim of Iago. When Iago first suggested that Desdemona's content was not really that of a bride waiting in modest expectation for her bridegroom's reserve to be ended, but of one who had already recoiled from his blackness to a man more fit in race and color, the cruel slander could seem only too true and probable to the harassed Moor. "Why did I marry?" Even before, he was convinced no good was coming of the union.

"O curse of marriage,  
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,  
And not their appetites."

Because of the condition of mind and body into which he had been thrust by the circumstances of his marriage, Othello was prepared for the hand of Iago; and his quick fall to suspicion, misery, and the awful rage of a soul ravaged of its ideals and its faith, is as natural and credible as it is mournful.

A barbarian by birth, removed from his mother in childhood and reared in the camp, Othello was still a man of such nature nothing could take him



beyond womanly influence. His peculiar life had removed him from women, not from woman. It is one of the mysteries and fascinations of the great Othello, whose immediate ancestry was traced to the desert, and who was himself a professional in the trade of war, that he had nothing of brutal force about him, but was naturally rich in all manly qualities; as Turnbull says, "Shakespeare's most perfect gentleman." Especially is this to be noticed before the troubles and complications springing from the clandestine inter-racial marriage had time to grow and twine themselves about him like fetters, but in no respect is the high quality of his civilization and religion better displayed than in his reverence for womanhood. It was a sad day and hour that such a man was led into a marriage which was improper in its secrecy and evasion as well as in a hopeless antagonism of race and blood. Othello could not escape the consequences of his own act, high as were his motives and plans. His punishment was doubly severe, however, and seems to embody the very irony of fate in bringing a man of such reverence for womanhood along the paths of a marriage of platonic idealism to an abyss where his faith in the virtue of woman was wrongfully ruined and himself destroyed.

The tremendous revulsion in the soul of Othello which carried him from the extreme of idealism of woman to the opposite one of loathing and abhorrence is expressed in the terrific outburst against Desdemona in the fourth act, where he declares he could have endured it to have poverty, disease, im-

prisonment, and odium heaped upon him,—could have sustained even the finger of scorn pointed at him as a man betrayed by a woman,—but he charges Desdemona with something worse in awful guilt than the falsity or dishonor which any woman bearing the name of wife could inflict on any common husband, for it has been in her power to strike with worse cruelty than that—and she has done it. She has wounded him—where?

“ But there, where I have garner’d \* up my heart,  
Where either I must live, or bear no life.”

No mere charge of wounded selfishness, of giving to another what was not so much as thought of by him, but of destroying his ideals of honor and laying waste those high places of the soul where a soldier had placed woman as the symbol of crowning fidelity and truth; where the idolized figure of the mother was to have stood by the idealized bride. If Desdemona was false, Heaven mocked itself—his faith in the honor and fidelity of man or woman was gone, the ideals so long carried in mind and heart were polluted, and he could no longer believe in decency upon earth. Everything that he had learned to value and cherish on his upward path from barbarism to civilization seemed to crumble in an hour, and cast him back to savagery under the worst of all calamities to such a man—shattered faith in human nature.

\* Delius : “ The word is finely chosen; to garner is to store that on which life depends.”

It was not one woman—Desdemona—that was lost to Othello, but all the higher world of sentiment and honor. A love so sweeping in its ruin had been founded, not in desire, but in holy renunciation, distant adoration. It was not the affection which, abused by one woman, may yet turn with confidence to another.

Boas gives an admirable exposition of the nature of Othello's affection, saying as it is fed from imagination it can be poisoned through the same source. Boas is a high authority, and his characterization of the love of Othello as purely ideal is so far worthy his penetrative analysis,—a most accurate response to the true chords sounding in the nature of the Moor,—but unfortunately he accepts the common version of the plot, so fatal to appropriate, to true, idealism, for in his account of the occurrences after the drinking scene in the second act he says "a scuffle follows which summons Othello from his marriage bed." If that be true, how are we to keep the Moor and his bride at the exaltation suited to their characters and the action? It is not merely useless, but offensive, to contend that in inter-racial marriage the ideal could be helped, not injured, by a consummation of the union. Boas himself says if Desdemona had ever ceased to regard Othello from the point of fancy and romance, and had looked at his real possibilities, "she might perchance have turned shuddering away." And yet he tells us she was devoted to marriage with this black man and continued to dwell in the realms of fairy. It is impossible. Be-

tween white and black such a thing could not be. Brabantio thought witchcraft, drugs, or love philters bought of mountebanks necessary to inspire Desdemona with a love for Othello; assuredly something as blinding must have been needful if Boas is right and we are still to regard the union from the standpoint of elevated and elevating sentiment. Desdemona thought love could glorify it, but was deluded by her excessive spirituality. Nature could not so preposterously err.

The awfulness of Desdemona's offense in Othello's eyes was in giving to another what her own husband did not even think of—he who had sought to place her upon a plane high above common wifehood with no duty of person toward him, too much like a goddess to assume any physical relation or be thought of for a selfish reason or desire. As Iago said, she had played the god with his weak function. His love had been best expressed in his first gift to her—the handkerchief, the antique token which came from his mother, which had been guarded with religious care and kept with other ideals in the part of his soul where for so many years he had “garner’d up his heart.” When Iago tried to poison him with suspicion he resisted other proofs for a time, but was unmanned at the first appearance of supposed dishonor to the antique token. She who was to guard and save the shrine of his heart was betraying it—the mere appearance of such dishonor, coming on the already anxious and troubled mind, swept away Othello's prudence and reason, destroyed all calm and care,



and caused him credulously to believe impossible things, bellow horrible obscenity, and finally murder Desdemona in her "virgin bed."

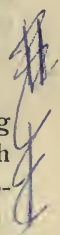
If truly jealous, Othello would have killed Cassio first—would not have allowed him to live a stroke of the clock after knowing of his apparent gloating avowal of guilt. But Cassio was not in the mind of Othello the supreme embodiment of guilt, simply a common adulterer who could be dispatched at another time or by another hand; the immediate duty, the supreme call of honor and justice, was for him to take the life of the criminal of double guilt, the woman whom he had sought to put above the life and lot of her sex in marriage, and who in basest treachery and ingratitude had taken herself below it. She was the worse for never having been a wife to him. She had not made him share her favors with another, but kept him a duped outcast from them. Worse than all else, she had wrecked his faith in womanhood and womanly honor, and with these ideals gone from the world Othello had no desire to live. If there was not at the summit of civilization the figure of a woman embodying the highest ideals of earth, Heaven mocked itself to Othello.

With the faith and the ideals so long enshrined where he had "garner'd up his heart" torn and dishonored, the whole manly nature seemed on the point of going to pieces. If not actually insane, Othello was for one awful hour perilously near the border line: the foulness of his language at that time, so strikingly in contrast with his normal state,

indicates the extent of the mental and moral ruin—a fine dramatic stroke lost on those who complain of Othello's changed and fearfully vile expressions. As in the instances sometimes noticed where insanity causes the tongues of refined Christian women to grow foul, so it was with Othello under a disturbance and perturbation almost mortal to the mind and showing even in the language the ruin that had been wrought.

Poor Othello! Misjudged even in his ravings when will and mind were almost gone, he is also wrongly censured for his turn against Desdemona by writers who fail to see the course of cruel preparation through which he passed, and that his fears sprang from his own humility. True, he said:

“Not from mine own weak merits will I draw  
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt.”



“Her revolt!” Not at first a fear of waning affection or infidelity, but something over which she herself would not have control—something provoked by his own repelling unfitness—a revolt.

He says he will not fear such a result, but he proceeds to do so nevertheless—to create doubts based solely on his own weak merits, as if fate itself forced him to it. With nothing in Desdemona's conduct to sustain a doubt, he begins to suspect that his race, his color, must compel her to turn from him; and, once fired with this suspicion, the fact of the platonic union only feeds the flames. Had the pair been able to enter into the ordinary relations of marriage, Othello would

have had the strongest proofs a woman can offer to a man of her love and his acceptability. Such proofs once attained, he could have had little fear she would afterward take an aversion to his blackness, but when she had never accepted it physically, and he did not ever intend she should, the ground was prepared and the seed sowed for the inevitable doubt born of temptation and unnatural denial. Of all husbands Othello most needed the strongest assurance nature could give, yet in the idyllic delicacy of his affection he had placed Desdemona where she was to supply none of the final proofs that most disarm suspicion when enjoyed and most foster doubt when not enjoyed. Othello's blackness demanded the very evidence it excluded. The vaulting ambition of a soul love overleaped itself and fell on the other side.

As Desdemona embodied all that was precious to Othello in culture, refinement, religion, and honor—all the inspirations which had stimulated his upward career from barbarism until he became the chief defender of a Christian state from the Turks—so when she seemed to be false everything in civilization dropped away from the Moor for a time. Schlegel's belief of the reassertion of the barbarian in Othello and the eclipse of his civilized nature seems to me finely correct, with the qualification that the phenomenon be limited to one awful hour and the Moor is afterward restored to his higher self. His fury is that of a storm which quickly passes. He is so shaken by the loss of his faith in woman and his ideals of honor that every-

thing he has acquired in his rise from the barbarian level appears to drop from him; but he recovers himself and dedicates his remaining life to honor, not revenge. He finds there is one thing left in the world—justice. That calls for Desdemona's death, and he finally gives her up to that, not to revenge. Shakespeare would not permit Othello to kill Desdemona while in the fit of despair and rage; the glorious tragedy which started with the inspiration of the platonic marriage was not to end in a common murder. So he restores Othello to a wondrous calm, requires him to reascend to a renewed belief of honor and justice yet alive in the world, and then take Desdemona's life with the calmness of a priest at the altar; kissing her dead lips as free from heat of rage toward her as he ever was from heat of desire. There was no animal jealousy in Othello, no impulse of sense in the motive demanding her death. It is a curious circumstance in harmony with this softened view of Desdemona's passing that medical authorities should find the old idea of her death from strangulation erroneous; the fact of her speaking after the suffocation indicating a secondary failure of the heart or a fracture of the larynx as the immediate cause of dissolution, relieving the physical suffering and rendering Othello not proximately the life-taker.

Restoring Othello to calm and to renewed faith in honor before the murder, and making him take Desdemona's life in a spirit of sacrifice to justice, there could be only one thing lacking to the most poignant tragedy ever portrayed in poetry; and that



was, after the bloody deed to have the Moor awoken to the knowledge of Desdemona's innocence and know she died sublimely forgiving and protecting her slayer. Again the world shakes beneath Othello's feet, life becomes impossible, death a relief; but the fatal draught is now charged with unspeakable sorrow. The anguish of lost love first left Othello ready to give up life, until the call of honor summoned him to duty again; now with Desdemona gone from this world, and by his hand, but with her truth and beauty all restored and shining resplendent, he cannot live longer in the life from which he thrust her.

I insist it was only for one bitter hour of despair Othello fell back to barbarism, and in his ultimate character the Moor belongs rather to an advanced civilization. Never must we lose sight of the Moor as a man who had fought his way up a long ascent from barbarism to civilization. Evidently intending him for a popular hero, Shakespeare makes him embody the cherished martial concepts of his time as to forcefulness and energy of character, but in a way to harmonize such powers with conscience and religion, thus advancing him beyond coarse chieftains and warriors. More than that, as we begin to comprehend the elevation of Othello in dealing with Desdemona, we recognize a hero who is not merely abreast of the best civilization of his own time in spirit, but one who had passed far beyond it and displayed the reverence for woman which is now the unerring modern test of human advancement. Othello was not a man of learning,

and Shakespeare never heard the scientific reason which makes the position of woman the best test of a nation's civilization. Indeed, even at this time it is only the few who comprehend the position to which woman has been brought in human evolution and realize how it is, as George Eliot said, that in the delicate vessels of girlhood the future of humanity is carried. The pressure of advancing civilization comes first on woman, and she takes its pains as Winkelreid did the spears in the pass, making way for advancement and victory. Science had not taught in Shakespeare's time the reasons which entitle woman as the child-bearer to the special care and reverence of progressive and progressing civilization, but Othello is a most picturesque and powerful exponent of the sentiment arising from this truth—one who voices it powerfully because he feels it deeply. Out of the mouth of this barbarian born, Shakespeare voiced the advanced sentiment of advanced civilization.

The care with which Othello guarded the antique token coming from his mother, and held by him in trust for the future bride, indicates powerfully and tenderly his profound reverence for womanhood. The precious value he put on the handkerchief is indeed one of the axial points on which the plot turns at an important development. His esteem for it was fairly superstitious; he had impressed its sacred character on Desdemona, and he could not think for a moment she could be so negligent in its keeping as to lose it. The fact of its being out of her pos-

session is accepted at once not as suggesting accidental loss or carelessness, but as proof of something immeasurably worse. Othello's preternatural sensitiveness and anxiety about the handkerchief symbolize his reverential regard for womanly purity and honor. He held out against Iago's insinuations until the suggestion of dishonor to the handkerchief was started and caused to hang over him like the raven over the infected house. After that it was handkerchief, and yet again handkerchief. When told Cassio had been seen wiping his beard with the antique token Othello's calmness and care vanished, and he exclaimed, "Now do I see 't is true." The "shame of shames" was forced on him when he was made to see the sacred talisman that came from his mother a plaything in the hands of the courtesan Bianca. "Confess"—"handkerchief"—were the two things summing up all his agony, and under the fearful pressure of which he sank to the earth with his brain in the clutch of pseudo-epilepsy. In the higher sentiments which involve relations with women and regard for the sex, this jealous custodian of the antique token towers above the men about him—far above even the gallant Cassio, who was otherwise a fit type of a chivalrous soldier in the army of a Christian nation.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### PALLIATION ACCOMPLISHED.

MUCH exception is taken now, at the close of the nineteenth century, to the doctrine of the "tragic fault"—the need that the principal characters in a tragedy must perish through some error primarily their own. In a recent popular study of "Romeo and Juliet" Dr. Corson protests against this principle as degrading the beautiful love tragedy into a cold lesson of practical prudence. He thinks the play a glorification of sexual love, and declares the lesson is not a caution to all young men and maidens against going it too strong in affairs of the heart. Surely not. But does the principle of the "tragic fault" require such a conclusion?

If the fate of the characters in tragedy does not spring from some error essentially their own, we must expect to have our sympathies moved mostly by sheer fatalism, or unprovoked, unaccountable calamity falling upon them; just as we see disease and death coming to our fellows every day. The only attitude toward such dispensations is that of the submission to the inevitable and inscrutable—a necessary course in real life, but a quite unsatisfactory one in the world of tragic poetry. There we need not inexplicable disaster such as all men



must bow to resignedly: we want such misfortune as the hero might have prevented, had he been wiser, better guarded, or had encountered disaster in a stronger hour; the pathos which has resting upon it the infinite woe of the might-not-have-been—the heart-moving deplorableness of a sorrow mistakenly self-provoked.

The playgoer's attitude is not that of one who looks upon the acts of the stage as those he may emulate or avoid in the future. Instead, he is to think of them as forever past, yet as if he might possibly have had to face them, being wrought upon when more exposed to error perhaps than now,—more like the character of the play,—and must half-consciously ask whether, if indeed placed like the hero of the mimic scene, he might not have fallen into the same misfortune. Might not we at some past time in our lives have given way, under like circumstances, to love raptures like unto those of Romeo and Juliet—have been equally careless or regardless of filial duty, family obligations, and of the world; neglected all prudence and plunged headlong into a blind devotion? Could you in some fine, high, unguarded hour have committed the error of Romeo and Juliet, generous as it was, mistaken as it was? If, thinking of emotions of your own which may have carried you beyond cold prudence, your answer be "Yes, yes," the right chord is moved, and you can never have occasion to join either school of critics in haggling over the tragic fault, for your appreciation will be sympathetic, not coldly intellectual. You get the

close realistic touch; you feel the sympathy; you realize the glory.

Heroes of the battlefield sometimes perform exploits which are hazardous and in excess of military duty, promising almost certain death, and which every instinct of prudence would prompt them to avoid, but their devotion is the more glorious for the recklessness. Men who value their lives may not imitate such bravery, but as we read with quickened breath we think in some high hour we might have done the like—have recklessly, needlessly perhaps, yet heroically, exposed our lives, and in so doing have done an incidental wrong, it may be, to those near to or dependent upon us, by taking unnecessary risk; but the glory, devotion, and self-surrender would remain.

Desdemona's fault is so glaring we can never think of her as a victim of blind fate, of mysterious calamity. She brought disaster on herself—sooner or later evil must come to a Venetian belle who marries with a blackamoor. Nothing else is to be expected. The case, therefore, is not one of inexplicable calamity; it must be assigned to the class that might not have been; its pains and penalties belong to the persons who might have prevented them, but did not.\* Desdemona might have avoided the disaster; and so might we in her place, but—would we? There's the rub—there lies the leaven of true tragic effect. If we had been, as Desdemona, reared amid luxury and refinement,

marriage  
of class

\* The rules of the drama and of equity jurisprudence are here the same.

rendered extremely delicate and refined, with no need ever to reject the gross, but with every facility to ignore it or feel it not; yet in early youth, and with a half-unconscious but most real loneliness of heart, because the men about had moral natures too base to move it, but with the ideals stirred at last in the presence of a man of glorious soul who revered such as we, but who had been cruelly cut off from the womanly sympathy and affection he so nobly merited—what then? Putting ourselves in the place of such a maid as Desdemona, and enabled to look into the noble heart of the blackamoor, might not we too have seen his color only in his mind? Might it not have been in us too a glorified, if fatal, error?

Desdemona has the “tragic fault”—to her glory be it said. Conduct that would be scandalous in other women—conduct that must be punished in any woman—in her case has to be followed with our sympathy and tears. This heart-moving sorrow would be quite different in effect if Desdemona’s woe sprang from inexplicable and unaccountable fate with no cause in her own acts; and equally so if it came from the revolting one of actual miscegenation. It is not so; there is an ample cause for her calamity in the fact of her marrying with Othello; but it is touchingly palliated by the non-consummation and by her transforming idealism of mind and heart.

This beautiful mitigation enables Shakespeare to avoid cold sentimentalism and keep Desdemona pressing steadily forward toward the consummation

of her union with the Moor in a way that would be intolerable in a woman of less exquisite delicacy and spirituality. She sees nothing, and up to the last moment feels nothing, but a sense of dedicating herself to the loftiest manliness and worth. She does not reconcile herself to the Moor's complexion or to the physical discord; she utterly and absolutely ignores them. "My heart's subdued even to the very quality of my lord." Taking Othello just as he was, to him did she her "soul and fortunes consecrate." Desdemona's spirituality and accompanying sense of devotion may be extreme and unfortunate, but they are beautiful, and display the spirit of feminine consecration at its highest.

Thus we have in Desdemona the "tragic fault" with fullest palliation. Desdemona is a high type of woman; the feminine spirit of self-devotion is an overruling one with her, and with it she could do anything. So modest, Brabantio said, that her motion blushed at herself, she yet boldly became half the wooer and hinted to Othello that he need not hesitate. Gentle and timid, a most dutiful daughter, she proves at once equal to defiance of parental authority, and goes off in elopement and secret marriage. She braves the open Senate in defense of Othello; she demands to be taken with him to the seat of war. And after the reunion with Othello at Cyprus, half-unconsciously and yet with the spirit that cannot stop without paying to the full the conjugal debt of devotion, Desdemona presses on toward the consummation of her mar-



riage. It might seem as if Desdemona had no thought of consummating the relation until driven to it in the effort to clear herself and convince her husband of her innocence, but that early ominous phrase "his bed shall seem a school,"—uttered before Iago had found a loophole or begun to whisper,—and her declaration of saving the vessel for her lord, show the cross in the love of the Moor and his bride existing in their own diverse intents and primarily a wrong of their own making.

Once committed to wedlock, Desdemona keeps moving all unconsciously, but none the less truly, toward the goal of maternity. The late-coming hope of proving her innocence to Othello in virginal surrender only strengthens and confirms an impulse which was asserting itself before, little as the young wife realized it. And at last, even when the voice of protesting physical nature spoke to her in portents and the wedding sheets seemed turning to shrouds, she did not hesitate or think of averting the proposed consecration. "Prithee dispatch," she said, hurrying her disrobing; then fell into that wonderful sleep, peaceful as childhood and coming of a conscience at last appeased.

Had there been no Iago and no quick jealousy of the Moor, Desdemona would have fallen a victim to her surroundings and herself. Dangerously spiritual and almost fanatical in the intensity of her devotion, she could not have endured a permanent exclusion from wifely consecration and maternity; and as the abstinent resolution of the Moor could never have been changed, Desdemona would not

have found her ruin in the motherhood of mixed offspring, but must ultimately have abandoned Othello, even as she deserted her father when he stood in the way of her heart-hunger. The excessive spirituality of Desdemona, and her habit of thinking physical relations altogether lost in the mental and emotional, together with her impaired social position and her abnormal spirit of self-sacrifice, would in time have tried her virtue to the limit. No wonder her fatal error brought her father to his grave. She was doomed from the time of her marriage one way or another.

Shakespeare reaches the acme of tragic art when, just as the faults of the noble pair are caused to stand out the more clearly as ones from which they cannot escape, our sympathies are stirred, and the glory of the ideal and of unmeasured devotion strengthens steadily. In conscience and truth we can never deny that Desdemona erred in her marriage and invited calamity in some form, but our hearts melt that such loveliness and devotion, so beautifully true to the highest instincts of womanhood, should be brought to inevitable and dreadful wreck because generously mistaken in one respect. And so with Othello. His tragic fault can never be denied—he attempted the impossible in denying the needs of his own nature, when his “vaulting ambition o’erleaped itself to fall on the other side,” but his error was surely the noblest mortal man can commit. Add to these complications the diverse intents and desires of the pair, he expecting one thing, she another, with the disillu-

sionment of one or both a certainty under any circumstances, and we have the sorrow, not of blind fate, but of a mistake purely human, voluntary, yet glorified—pathos which most doth wring the heart.

Elsewhere we consider some of the mighty questions of the enveloping plots—the religious one of the arrested marriage and the Christianized Mohammedan; the caste one of the former slave rising to high honor and command; the sociological one of the inhibited black-white marriage. Here and now we may confine attention to the central, primary, dramatic development of palliation for the marriage—that to which all others are for the present purpose subordinate.

Limiting inquiry for the present simply to the field of dramaturgic art, we have here the finest instance of Shakespeare's power of transfiguration. It was for his mastery in casting soul-moving extenuation over the most stern and undeniable tragic fault that Shakespeare's contemporaries praised him most. To them his most wonderful power was that which could take essentially abhorrent acts or relations and cause them to change even before their eyes until they effect an irresistible appeal to the heart. A brother poet of his day tells us Shakespeare did so temper passion that "the ear took pleasure in the pain"—a description which we may well think prompted by that union of the fair maid and the blackamoor chief which, seeming to promise nauseous offense, is wondrously turned and wrought until it appears at once most beautiful, devoted, lofty, yet fatal.

Understood as a tale of supersensuous love, not of miscegenation, the "Othello" shows us an undeniable tragic fault carried to the highest pitch of heart-melting extenuation. Praising him beyond all else for such exploits as this, Shakespeare's associates recognized his power of transfiguration as something which passed beyond their imitation. The palliation and purification in this instance not only go far beyond what other dramatists could do, but surpass any other effort of Shakespeare himself. Aiming at higher, more difficult mitigation than ever before, he devotes the masculine Othello to absolute marital abstention through lofty motives, and then causes the blooming and delicate young bride to struggle steadily against the current of the platonic marriage from the first. What can this mean save the fullest possible justification for Desdemona in the suggestion of abstinent marriage as easier for exalted manhood than for the noblest womanhood, since the latter, once committed to the current of acceptable wedlock, seeks inevitably for the consecration of that state, and is not to be withheld in content unless the final beatitude of maternity is miraculously bestowed, as upon Mary in the miracle play?

But was it not something more than even the highest change or advance in his art as a playwright that swept Shakespeare up to a complete palliation of a black-white marriage by means of sensuous impulse absolutely conquered in a virile man, absolutely sanctified in a super-refined woman? None of his other men, none of his other



women, would serve such a portrayal. Juliet, Imogene, Portia, and Helena must all stand aside. They were lovely women, but they had at times a coarseness of speech which not even in that age could Shakespeare permit in the woman who was to become the bride of a Moor in a union emulating in human virtue the one of the sacred drama. Juliet spoke of the physical relations of wedlock; Helena discussed with a man the means of defending virginity from assault; Portia had her joke about the prince's mother being false with a smith; poor Ophelia's lips were stained. But Desdemona could not even speak the name of a vile woman. Why, then, is she exalted so far above Shakespeare's other women in delicacy? Dramatic art did not require that. The Elizabethans would have thought it enough to palliate her fault by showing purity of love and the spirit of self-sacrifice as the motives prompting her; and she might have spoken such language as the other women and been spoken to at times in terms of like coarseness. But no; desperate as is the tragic fault of Desdemona, the extenuation with her is carried far higher than for any other heroine: mitigation does not stop until we are brought to feel what Mrs. Jameson terms the "angelic refinement" of the character.

Fully as unusual is the palliation wrought for the Moor. But the taste of Elizabethan playgoers did not demand this upward flight of the "Othello." It was best suited with denial preserved behind a locked door and desire clamoring for admission; or with a refusal coming

from a husband, but inspired by preference for another—anything but a manly chasteness. Self-denied husbands are rare in the Elizabethan drama, and almost always show weakness; the atmosphere of the early playhouse is on them all. It is seldom we encounter creatures like those in Fletcher's "Faithful Shepherdess" who loved their loves until repelled by hints of female desire; and when we do, they appear usually as pastoral beings dwelling appropriately in enchanted groves rather than personages in real life. The heroes of the Elizabethan stage were generally of another stamp: strong, determined, but wavering before appetite. Amintor, forced to give up his true love and wed another, nevertheless sought that other at the first opportunity. Virolet was nobler, refusing his second wife in devotion to the first, who was yet living and unwillingly divorced; but his abstinence is not glorious like Othello's, for he was still subject to wrong impulses. There was no virtue, no high control, in Bertram's denial of his devoted bride; none in the exclusion which Evanthe and Ordella had to suffer from their new-found husbands.

In many other instances like those cited the abstinence was either compulsory or was a display of ill-will toward wives by men quick enough to approach other women. It was a spell of necromancy that withheld Valerio; a stupefying drug that paralyzed the functions of Thierry. Even the noble Albert, who "sanctimoniously observed" Aminta's privacy when they were alone together on

an island, nevertheless made advances later which should never precede formal marriage. The Knight of Malta, with all his devotion to Oriana, steps aside in a weak moment to whisper to her attendant. In the "Enforced Marriage" it appears at last Scarborough actually consummated his union with Katherine, unwilling though it was, and that too while declaring he had no wife in truth, but was finely and fully devoted to the dead Clare.

Feminine renunciation is sometimes truer, not always. The sentiments of Oriana were exalted when she appealed to her unwed lover to preserve their spiritual affection forever in its purity, but alas! she was then expecting to continue in the full life of marriage with a man whom she did not love. Virolet is, in many ways, the highest type of manly chasteness to be found in the Elizabethan drama outside Shakespeare. Compelled by overwhelming power of circumstances to divorce his beloved wife and wed Martia against his will, he refuses to the latter a consummation of the marriage, and holds himself sacred to his first love. Still, his virtue is not that of Othello. In the last analysis we find it is only the old Elizabethan dramatic motive which causes a husband to deny a wife through preference for another. Virolet is indeed faithful to Juliana, and superior to the baser passion to a laudable extent, but he proves himself false to honor and subject to desire when he approaches his former wife without "the seal o' th' church," and has to be repelled by her.

Those pastoral beings, Perigot and Daphnis, did

indeed turn to reproach and disgust when their shepherdess loves hinted of desire, but they have little appearance of real men, and their reserve is as unreal and fantastic as that of Victor Hugo's Marius, who felt outraged that Cosette's skirt should be raised so high as to disclose her sacred ankles. Generally in the Elizabethan drama the reserve of men is not manly, but stands for immaturity, preference for another, stupefying drinks, foul spells, or the like. It is not intended to be permanent through life's prime, in daily marital association with a loved and loving one; absolutely faithful, unswerving, and with denial imposed by honor alone. That was left for Shakespeare, and when he accomplished it others dared not even imitate the bold exploit.

To dally with and vex in the Elizabethan way nuptials of black and white would have been disgusting; and in the height of his art Shakespeare perceived that only the most complete and absolute palliation could suffice in such a case—nothing much less than the semi-sacred redemption of the marriage of Joseph and Mary in the old miracle play of his youth.

But what of the nuptial celebration? If Shakespeare had intended merely to revive the fantastic, superangelical loves of knights of chivalry like Perceval and Galahad, and to show that of Desdemona and Othello to have only the mitigation of cold sentimentality, he would have drawn the hero and lady both in reserve, and never have permitted the bridal celebration with its warm and inconsistent



suggestion. It is the nuptial occasion which, although arrested, casts out chill platonic, relieves the monk-like renunciation of Othello by throwing him into the glow of hymeneal intimations, and above all renders Desdemona thoroughly human, womanly, bride-like. Cold sentimentalism, such as would have ruined the picture in other hands, is swept away. The conception of a love reciprocal but taking one direction with the man and the other with the woman, is startling, powerful, profoundly true and essential to warm, moving effect. Causing the bride to be the one who all unconsciously but steadily works against the preservation of platonic relations, Shakespeare does not hesitate before a difficulty that would have appalled any other dramatist, but proceeds at once to assign this same woman one of the loftiest parts ever played by one of her sex; compelling us to perceive only a desire for wifely consecration and the sanctification of love as the motives which prompted her to see the color in the mind and moved her steadily toward the consummation of the marriage. Only Shakespeare could accomplish such difficult but transcendently beautiful palliation.\*

Incredible as it may seem, the critics have stood in the presence of the great difficulty in the

\* Exploiting various phases of love, Elizabethan dramatists dealt at times with strangely ardent affection between men. They could conceive, too, of men and women as destitute of the baser passion. The one thing beyond all but Shakespeare was such sanctification of it as in Othello and Desdemona.

"Othello" without so much as considering what light might be obtained from the old mystery or miracle play of Shakespeare's youth, with its sooty faces of the "black souls" and its platonic marriage of Mary and Joseph. Even more singular is the lack of comparative study of "Lust's Dominion" or the "Spanish Moor's Tragedy," which preceded Shakespeare's work five years on the Elizabethan stage, and presented the first effort to invest a marriage of black and white with poetic interest. I will not stop to consider whether that play is partly Marlowe's or not. For the present purpose it is sufficient to know that it was produced at least five years before the "Othello," and attained considerable popularity. Shakespeare's familiarity with it is evident. He did not follow it in plot or characterization, marvelously improving upon both; but throughout the "Othello" we find repetitions or paraphrases of the language of the older play which show how well Shakespeare knew it. Thus the elder Moor was termed "a devil" and "a slave of Barbara," while Othello is likewise maligned by Iago as "the devil" and "a Barbary horse"; Phillip in the first piece says "I'll play the devil," while Iago asks "what's he then that says I play the villain?" and immediately proves his villainy by disclosing his slander of Desdemona "that she repeals him," which is an echo of the king's declaration, "'Twas we that repeal'd him." Othello tells Iago that beyond the slander of Desdemona "nothing canst thou to damnation add," while in the

older play all the characters on the stage cry out against an act as "worse than damnation"—a difference and a distinction, and yet with something parallel. Maria says "I am as free from murder as thyself," while Bianca says she is "as honest as you that thus abuse me." Eleazer thinks men sometimes "lay their souls to the stake," while Emilia says she dares "lay down my soul at stake." Maria promised that "Such love as I dare yield I'll not deny," and Desdemona protested she had not loved Cassio save with "such general warranty of heaven as I might love." Eleazer says that

" Sin shines clear

When her black face religion's mask doth wear,"

while Iago confesses in soliloquy that

" When devils will the blackest sins put on

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows."

These resemblances and repetitions are significant as showing how familiar the older play must have been to Shakespeare. Convinced that he knew it well, we may better appreciate the vast improvement he introduced in picturing an intermarriage and investing it with the extenuation of poetic beauty. The older play was the pioneer effort in the direction of beautifying the love of a refined white woman for a black man, but its measure of success was scanty and feeble compared with that of Shakespeare. Where was his improvement? It abounds throughout, but is especially strong in the beautiful extenuation of the fault of the pair in entering an unnatural marriage.

Othello is strikingly like Eleazer in being a great, an invincible warrior. That conception of a Moor was already familiar to the Elizabethan stage, and Shakespeare followed it faithfully. Both Moors are black in the face and powerful of arm,—fearful opponents to meet in the field,—but there all resemblance ceases. Because of his value to the state in bearing arms against the Turks, Eleazer has to be rewarded, honored, courted; but aside from his bravery he is altogether repulsive—libidinous, treacherous, bloodthirsty. As Dodsley says, “The philanthropy of our ancestors was not shocked at any representation of an African or an Israelite.” Eleazer was painted right to the Elizabethan conception of Moors as powerful warriors, but almost as dangerous to society in peace as to their enemies in war. There is never a moment when we feel sympathy for Eleazer; and, so far as he is concerned, the intermarriage is left without a touch of redeeming beauty. The noble conception of mitigating the marriage by exalting the character and conduct of the blackamoor husband was left to Shakespeare; the older Moor was in every respect abominable.

It is not until we come to the blackamoor’s wife, Maria, that we see the aim of Shakespeare’s predecessors to extenuate the marriage of amalgamation; and we find their efforts directed to two points: (1) to accentuate her devotion to her black lord as that of a delicate and unselfish spirit; and (2) to divert Eleazer’s ardors from her to another woman, thus drawing the mind of the spectator away from any-



thing suggestive of conjugal intimacy. Eleazer never offers his wife a caress, a kiss, or an endearing word. We know not how long they have been married, but there is an absolute absence of any hymeneal or nuptial touches. There is no suggestion of offspring. Himself false to wedlock and to all other obligations of conscience, Eleazer's jealousy, so far as he was capable of any such feeling, was thoroughly base, ungrateful, despicable, without a shadow of excuse—that of a man who really cared nothing for his wife or for her honor. The playwrights, in their struggle to save the delicacy of Maria, have to keep the blackamoor in such aloofness that he hardly seems to be an actual husband, although a platonic marriage is out of the question with him, and we must regard the union as one of consummation. And just there is the indelible stain on Maria. Gracious and devoted as she is, we can never think her nature is really as delicate as her language unless by assuming a certain weakness of intellect. There is no reason why she should have married the Moor—no mitigation or palliation of the marriage. We cannot elevate the relation to the mental or emotional, for Eleazer is as unfit to mate with her there as he is in physical relations. Hence, despite all the efforts of the playwrights to invest the marriage with extenuation by beautifying the character and motives of Maria, there is a painful failure because the Moor was wholly unworthy; and her marital relations with the lecherous savage are sickening and disgusting. It is a decided relief when the play-

wrights end the marriage early in the play by sending Maria to a death that we cannot much regret.

Maria's devotion is that of sentimental or feeble-minded infatuation rather than true love. Or if we think such a characterization too severe for one who was certainly most unselfish and devoted, we cannot but regard her affection for the blackamoor as miserable and painful. In real life we are sometimes distressed to see the utmost of womanly devotion fastened upon wretched sots or foul criminals, but that is not the material of poetic or tragic art. There is a failure to touch the chord of fellow-feeling. We are not disposed to think of ourselves as linked in marriage with the beastly and the foul. So it must be said of this first effort to portray a black-white marriage in English drama, despite all the beautiful lines in the character of Maria, that the final impression is not one of piteous sympathy and fellow-feeling suitably evoked, but of pain and disgust that a refined and delicate woman of the white race should be joined in marriage with a brutal, lustful, and abhorrent Moor.

Content to echo phrases and expressions from the earlier play as if to compliment its authors, Shakespeare marvelously recreated the marital conditions of black and white by ennobling Othello in character and conduct and rendering the marriage one that exalts him while it saves his beautiful bride, and is extenuated in beauty until it commands our uttermost sense of sympathy.

To apprehend the great redeeming truth of the "Othello," we must raise our eyes to the eleva-

tion of the master playwright's refined art. It is we who, groveling here below, conceive this tale to be one of forbidding grossness. Shakespeare's associates and contemporaries could have had no thought of such a thing. Above all else they praised him for the manner in which he cast witchery and pathos over the most difficult relations. A brother poet of his own day sang the praise of Shakespeare that he did delight to move

“ A chilling pity, then a rigorous love;  
To strike up and stroke down both joy and ire;  
To steer th' affections; and by heavenly fire  
Mold us anew.”

Just such is his work in the “ Othello,” carrying the black-white love up and down, and at last illumining it with heavenly fire to mold us anew.

To perceive the sunburst of supersensuous love rising upon sinking, fading amalgamation, we must get back to the view and appreciation of the brother poet of Shakespeare's own time, who, in the same tribute already quoted, declared that when “ two contraries ” flamed up in tragic poetry, as of beauty where we expected offense—

“ Two different passions from the rapt soul rise,  
Say, (who alone effect such wonders could)  
Rare Shakespeare to the life thou dost behold.”

And in all the cases where he wrought such wonders and transformed the seemingly hideous into glory, there is none to equal the “ Othello ” when we get away from wrong commentary and behold it aright.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### CULMINATION OF THE WEDDING PLOT.

THE incident of Desdemona's disrobing and call for her wedding sheets, in the fourth act, is apt to strike readers of the present time as needlessly suggestive, but it would not displease even feminine delicacy if studied long enough to be seen in its true setting and softly veiled in the nuptial customs and poetry of the Elizabethans. If we can but put away a false feeling of coarseness and view the incident truly, it will prove an invaluable illustration of Shakespeare's art, especially when compared with the efforts of other Elizabethan poets to draw near the nuptial chamber, and it will be found also to bear with convincing force on the wedding plot of the play and to reveal Shakespeare himself in a new light. A consideration of the incident is the more important as it has been sadly misconceived, both in respect to its beauty and its significance, by the only writers who have made it the subject of special remark—Wilson and Clarke. They say that in her overwhelming sorrow Desdemona called for her wedding sheets to be brought forth again as reminders of the happier days of her early married life, forgetting, as her husband was indubitably black, that this would stain her delicacy and rep-



resent her as glorying in and preserving memorials of a wrong to her race and her sex. But even those who find it comforting to believe Othello so nearly white as to be an inoffensive husband for the fair Venetian, cannot regard the wedding sheets as produced for a renewed use without missing a stroke of art which no lover of Shakespeare should be willing to pass unseen.

The call for the wedding sheets, like that for her "nightly wearing," indicates the preparation of the nuptial chamber to welcome Othello; but the order for the spreading of the bed, and Emilia's dismissal for the night, are more specific, and show it is the first coming of the Moor that is expected. That is why Emilia is so reluctant to proceed with the preparations, being unwilling to have Desdemona given fully to the blackamoor. "Dismiss me!" "Here's a change indeed!" Just as the waiting-woman's surprise at her dismissal shows a new turn of affairs, so did the call for the wedding sheets indicate the approach of what was to Emilia a surprising change in the relations of Desdemona and the Moor. This was not, as the commentators have strangely supposed, a tenth or a fifth or even a second time that Desdemona had called for her wedding sheets and dismissed Emilia for the night. It was the first. And yet it was the night of the young wife's death. Pictures of bridal disrobing and preparation on the marriage night were common in nuptial poetry and on the stage in Shakespeare's day; but the belated call for the wedding sheets in this instance was a peculiar manifestation

of dramaturgic art. Wedding sheets were distinct emblems of the joyous nuptial occasion, but they are produced now after the early happiness of the marriage is gone, Othello's wrong suspicion having reached the last degree of misery, and Desdemona's cup of sorrow overflowing. What a time to produce wedding sheets as memorials! If the sheets had post-nuptial significance (as they did not in Shakespeare's time), and were saved as memorials, the sight of them could only infuriate Othello all the more, since in that event they must be to him fresh reminders of wifely honor basely lost. Desdemona did many unhappy things, but she could never have committed so gross a blunder as that. Desdemona's inspiration was wholly different—that of offering to Othello a virginal sacrifice which should prove absolutely her innocence. Such was the significance of wedding sheets, and the call for them at this late time in the marriage, and in the hour of sorrow, not of nuptial joy, is a moving stroke of Shakespearean art long lost to the world.

If students will recur to the long-forgotten nuptial poetry and bridal customs of Shakespeare's day, noting how the sheets put upon the bridal couch were thought to give the young husband indubitable assurance on the marriage night, and attest conclusively the virtue in which the new family took its start, they cannot fail to gain a higher appreciation of our great playwright's art.\*

\* This expectation is disclosed in Massinger's "Bond-

In the old nuptial customs of the Elizabethans the bride was often sewed in the wedding sheets, and it was the duty of the bridegroom to rend them to tatters in his approach; but even if not destroyed in this way, they were regarded like the breaking of the bride's crystal bowl, or the loosing of the maiden zone, as significant on only one occasion in a woman's life. A widow, remarrying, could not use them. They attested the loss of maidenhood; and when that was done, if not actually destroyed, they were reduced to mere linen without symbolic meaning or significance, and were never memorials.

Not until this peculiar meaning of these emblems, as pertaining to one occasion and one event, is properly understood, can we appreciate the art of Shakespeare in causing the delayed call for them to give indirect, delicate, but convincing proof of Desdemona's virginal state being yet preserved in marriage. Nothing can be more instructive in this way than a comparison of Desdemona's disrobing with like scenes of bridal preparation by Shakespeare's contemporaries. One will have a long search in the Elizabethan drama to find a virginal state suggested by a mere scene of undressing and the spreading of wedding sheets without the accom-

man," where Cleora is urged to free herself from aspersions of her virtue.

"To which there is no easier way than by  
Vouchsafing him your favor."

But with Desdemona there is no direct allusion to her expectation; all is implied in the call for the wedding sheets.

paniment of broad insinuation and banter. Usually the bride was chaffed unmercifully by her attendants during the undressing, while the admonitions to the bridegroom and his behaviors were sometimes genuinely humorous, often decidedly broad, and occasionally grossly indelicate. Nothing of the sort is permitted to approach Desdemona. We can never appreciate the circumstances of pity and purification which the Elizabethans saw in Desdemona's disrobing until we learn what they usually expected and perceived in such scenes. Passing without further remark the incredible coarseness of the old miracle play, with its attestation of a virginity preserved in marriage, we may refer the reader who desires to inquire further into the Elizabethan idea to the passing of maidenhood in the "Maid's Tragedy" of Beaumont and Fletcher, to Heywood's dealing with Julia; or, if he seek evidence from real life, to the proceedings at the divorce of the Countess of Essex, whose marriage was annulled because never consummated. These proofs are certainly clear enough for anyone, but we might well be apprised of the fact, as Iago advised Roderigo to dispose of himself, in "a more delicate way."

As Burke says, distinctness of imagery or method may be injurious to art. But it was something more than an improvement in artistic method for Shakespeare, desiring to fix the impression of Desdemona's virginity preserved in marriage, to have no assertions or questions of the fact, no discussions, no hopes,



fears, or promises declared to depend upon a demonstration of it, but to leave them all to be implied from the simple, unexplained order of the young wife to her maid to spread the wedding sheets upon her couch. So singularly careful is Shakespeare to keep Desdemona sacred and apart from the coarseness of allusion that played around his other women, that the wedding sheets are not even mentioned until they have been invested with a softening and saddening meaning which greatly overclouds the primary one. The very disrobing scene, usually broad and suggestive, is changed into one of holy devotion and moving pathos.

Knowing Othello will not respond to her invitation, but perceiving that if he would the young wife's innocence could be demonstrated and Iago exposed, Desdemona's call for the wedding sheets does not raise the thought of marital approaches, but one of pity, sympathy, half-smothered hope. We think now of anything else than the once-hated consummation—of the wondrous devotion of Desdemona; of that unbreakable chasteness of the Moor, which we now almost wish to break, and of such beauteous love involved in such woe. To playgoers accustomed to the significance of the wedding sheets, on the one occasion for which they were prepared and on which they could speak, there was no danger of misapprehension. In the days of nuptial poetry no one having any appreciation of the hymenean could possibly think Desdemona was spreading her wedding sheets long after her maidenhood had been lost, any more than that the

drinking of the posset, breaking the bridal bowl, or sewing the bride in the sheets could be repeated after the nuptial night was passed.

There can be no doubt how the other playwrights of the time would have pictured Desdemona's state to their audiences. If the marriage had been consummated, they would have had her upbraid Othello for lack of confidence when he had so recently received proofs of innocence and wifely devotion. So, too, would he have had moments of reassurance based on such grounds. If, on the contrary, they intended the union to be yet unconsummated, they would have caused Desdemona to speak confidently of the vindication she could accomplish in proving her innocence to Othello; and the Moor would certainly have been found looking forward to the infallible test. But not a word of the sort is spoken by either Othello or Desdemona. All is implied, and implied in the call for the wedding sheets, and that incident is so clouded with pathos that not a trace of indelicacy is suggested by it.

Shakespeare's purpose was to indicate Desdemona's retained maidenhood, and as she had been some time married in form, supposition would naturally run toward consummation and make the case one requiring plain, positive statement. How, then, could he escape the coarseness distinguishing nuptial scenes where the necessity for plain speaking was nothing like as strong? Simply by the incident of the wedding sheets. To the Elizabethan mind the production of the wedding sheets could suggest only a preserved virginity. At any

rate, they had to catch the truth from that intimation or go uninformed. Nothing ruder than veiled suggestion is permitted to come near Desdemona. Approaching a demonstration which seems to require blunt and coarse declaration, Shakespeare used only delicate, veiled intimation, and yet could not have been misunderstood, save by thick skulls, in the days when nuptial nights had special celebration and bedding ballads were sung.

Elizabethan playgoers saw at once a significant disorder or disarrangement in the hymeneal incidents of the "Othello." The nuptial celebration announced and started in the second act was cut short or deflected without any bridal disrobing or spreading of the wedding sheets. Nor was there anything to stand as a substitute for such incidents. There was no drinking of the posset, no flinging the stocking, no sewing of the bride in the sheets, not even a mention of wedding sheets, but suggestions of absence and abstinence on the part of the Moor. The Elizabethan spectator, even if he did not catch the doubt in Othello's speech at the bridal-chamber door, knew on the instant the nuptial events were disordered and thrown out of sequence; and the culminating proof for all came near the close of the drama, when spectators were brought face to face with the delayed bridal disrobing and the spreading of the wedding sheets, although Desdemona had been then some time married. The intelligent playgoer saw at once crowning proof of what he had suspected all along—that Desdemona was yet a maiden, that her mar-

riage had not been consummated. And the chief inspiration in bringing out the wedding sheets at last is to offer Othello proof which shall attest, not only wifely devotion, but maiden innocence, clear away false suspicion, and relieve his anguish of mind.

This singular variation in the spirit and aim of hymeneal custom and poetry must have fascinated the interest of the Elizabethans, but to us it is even more absorbing to notice the delicacy of the delineation. The purpose is precisely that sought so rudely by other dramatists, namely, the disclosure of the yet virginal state of the young wife. But no one is suffered to mention it. The waiting woman is not permitted to speak of it even in the license of the disrobing scene, where chaff and banter were so common, and Desdemona is happily represented as not comprehending the vague general coarseness she hears on this occasion from Emilia, or such as she heard on a previous one from Iago. Any other Elizabethan dramatist would have had Desdemona or her maid speak of the uses of the wedding sheets, the hopes attached to them in this instance, and given explanation why they were produced so late. But Shakespeare will not permit indelicate assertion or allusion to touch or play around Desdemona. All has to be implied from the mere order to put the sheets upon the bed. The customary coarseness is purged away from this beautiful delineation; the reserved virginity of the maiden wife is attested only in what was so clearly but delicately implied in the disordered sequence



of the nuptial incidents and in the delayed call for the wedding sheets—tints which perhaps even uncultured minds could distinguish when nuptial poetry was blooming, but which, alas, have been utterly lost to later generations since that old imagery has faded from sight.

Eagerly copying him when they could, the playwright associates and successors of Shakespeare could do little with such a master stroke as the incident of the wedding sheets more than to admire it. In their hands such veiled insinuations would have been too weak for the tastes of their audiences; so they went on requiring the waiting-women to chaff the brides, while the bridegrooms displayed the usual transports and their usual disposition to rejoice over the proofs nature could furnish of a virginity not lost until marriage. They could not leave such things to be implied by the mere mention of the wedding sheets.

While in this study it has been argued that the Elizabethan playgoers as a class must have discerned and appreciated the beauty of the platonic marriage, I have sometimes had doubts whether the delineation was not too refined for all but the higher minds among them. The ordinary playgoers were familiar with hymeneal suggestion and with the device of arrested marriage; but not with so delicate a method of treatment. Did they understand fully that Othello was taken to the door of the nuptial chamber and caused to face the most inviting, lawful opportunity in order to test him to the uttermost, and that he was equal to it? The

delineation is there, but we must have the insight to perceive it through instant appreciation or prolonged study. Could the Elizabethans grasp the truth finally and completely from what was implied in the call for the wedding sheets? Did they perceive the implication in Iago's quick change of his early plan for revenge? We must doubt it; the stroke is so delicate. Iago's first nebulous scheme for vengeance was to corrupt Desdemona, and he said distinctly he would not resort to that of throwing Othello into a jealousy until the effort to tamper with the young wife had failed. During the voyage to Cyprus he was in close association with Desdemona, had every opportunity to study her, and he continued to think she might be accessible down to the revelations of the nuptial night. Then he changed instantly—dropped the half-formed scheme of approaching Desdemona as out of the question, and took up the second plan. What occurred that night to convince him the virtue of Desdemona was impregnable when he had not thought so before? Nothing, surely, but the indications of the absence of the Moor from Desdemona's chamber, and of her super-chaste life in marriage. Iago gives no reason for his change, and we can only imply it from the disclosures of the night: the intimation is delicate almost to vagueness.

The highest function of art is to reveal the god-like to man, and it would seem as if in this play Shakespeare believed he was approaching truths so divine and high that only superfine methods could

touch them. Iago slinks away from Desdemona without even betraying the source of his disappointment. Allusions and incidents which gave even Shakespeare a coarse delight when they played about his other women are not suffered to touch Desdemona. The beautiful truth is outlined, but Shakespeare took no care as previously to bring his meaning home to ordinary minds, but seems to have believed he was touching in the arrested marriage upon a truth so high and holy that only the uttermost refinements of his art could be employed. If classes of people, and even whole generations, should fail to catch the meaning, so much the worse for them. He would paint the picture with the delicacy proper to it, as one almost reaching over from the human to the divine, and leave the appreciation to such persons and such centuries as could seize upon it by intuition or by virtue of prolonged and reverent study. Such has sometimes been my thought when the pendulum has swung back from a belief of the early audiences perceiving the full beauty and glory of the tragedy.

## CHAPTER XV.

### IAGO AND HIS DUPE.

As the critics long ago felt compelled to look for some other meaning in the "Othello" than miscegenation and animal jealousy, they could not well stop with the mere whitening of the Moor. At best that could only improve the marriage a few degrees: the great want was to get away from it altogether and fix the attention elsewhere. Hence, a great labor of Shakespearean scholarship has been to render the piece the play of Iago \* rather than the play of Othello; with the interest drawn away from the strange marriage to the lurid success of the ensign in poisoning the mind of the Moor.

Thus the critics give us the strange, anomalous thing of a play of crude pessimism—a gore-piece, a morbid study of the abnormal—coming from Shakespeare at the height of his power, when his contemporaries were praising him for his wondrous art of evoking sympathy and working his plots so as to mold them anew with heavenly fire.

\* Brandes, one of the latest and ablest commentators, holds to this old theory. "The umbilical cord" directly connecting the master with his work "leads not to the character of Othello, but to that of Iago." He thinks the play "a study of wickedness in its might."



It is not so. If Shakespeare ever forgot himself, his art, and his time, it was not when he wrote the "Othello." His peculiar art of redeeming and transforming is not absent from this play; it is displayed here at its finest. We shall find, indeed, that we cannot avail ourselves of the justification of searching out the full might of wickedness in Iago as one that authorizes us to class the play as a thing apart in the work of Shakespeare; for it is not until we restore it to its true place that we can appreciate the baleful intellectual power of the ensign's character.

With the Moor, as one writer says, whipped by the ancient as a boy whips a great humming-top, we not only demean the great and ennobled-character for whom we ought to feel sympathy, but, doubly failing, we actually impair and becloud the brilliant exploit of the malignant villain. For, paradoxical as it may seem, it is not until we see Othello to be in a sense his own victim in the wedding plot of the play that we can appreciate the intellectual adroitness of Iago in taking advantage of that same situation, converting it to his uses, and employing its rare and exceptional secret as the nurse and mother of Othello's wrong suspicion.

Perhaps the very highest display of Iago's skill is when he meets on the instant a difficulty not possible to arrange for, but which came on him like a flash, born of the Moor's self-wrought involvement in the marriage, and was yet utilized by the crafty villain with surpassing force and effect. Missing that, we miss one of the finest strokes of the drama.

And Iago's finest craft with Roderigo is inextricably bound up in the wedding plot.

Throwing the play out of harmony the moment they insist on any other governing note than the one of the arrested marriage, the critics fail even of their chief purpose—the exaltation of Iago. Without the hymeneal underplot we cannot perceive the fine contrast in the acumen of Iago which enabled him at one time to presume to the verge of hazard, and yet with perfect success, on the unnatural tension of the Moor, while at another it caused the knave to realize, with quick and cautious acuteness, that he must not dare ask Othello to believe Desdemona's guilt probable on the basis of his own knowledge of her as a husband, but must qualify the general charge craftily. There is nothing more wonderful in intellectual villainy than Iago's quick-veering and self-adjusting craft. But to appreciate this we must see him both in his cautious, prehensive turns, and in his bold and seemingly reckless advances.

The false story presented to Othello's mind really hung by threads. If the handkerchief had not been lost; if Emilia had told the truth about it, and Desdemona had been more openly courageous and less timidly evasive; if Cassio had spoken in a louder tone when talking of Bianca, or had plainly given her name; if Roderigo, that most dangerous tool, had not stood the putting on, had demanded his jewels of Desdemona or persisted in his wrath against the ancient; if Cassio and Othello could have faced each other in frankly characteristic

speech for a few minutes, or if the Moor had searched out Roderigo after the brawl, or had made any careful and cautious inquiry in almost any direction, Iago must certainly have been exposed. It is not dramatically true to think Iago could have taken such risks as these had he not believed the Moor was in such a position and such a frame of mind as to be beside himself and incapable of prudence.

Very different Iago when plunged suddenly into a real difficulty. Observe his art in the light of the nuptial by-plot.

The elder Booth is described as speaking the opening line of Iago's axial speech in the temptation scene, "Ay, there's the point; as, to be bold with you" (III. iii. 228-238), as not only referring to Desdemona's open conduct with the Moor, but "insidiously summoning to Othello's memory secret occasions when she had shown 'a will most rank' and been 'bold' with him." Whether this rendering of the particular line be correct or not, there is, I insist, no way to stop short of assigning that meaning to the speech as a whole, so long as it is left in the light of the accepted interpretations and an ordinary marriage is assumed. "Foul disproportion" and "thoughts unnatural" have but one meaning coming from Iago. For Desdemona to refuse to marry within her own clime and complexion could not in itself be an offense against nature and decency. That could occur only when her turn from her own countrymen was followed by relations with some man of another and an alien

race which, if legal, were nevertheless foul and unnatural.

But whether unnatural passion was or was not Desdemona's motive in marrying the Moor, Iago knew that the one man who could determine the matter on the basis of his own knowledge was Othello; provided only he knew her as an actual husband. In that event Iago's accusation must either strike Othello dumb with its known truth or provoke him to anger by its known falsity. Greatly as the Moor blunders at times, we cannot believe he could be guilty of the wanton wrong of permitting an aspersion of his wife which he personally knew to be absolutely false to pass unrebuked. Certainly not at this early stage, when he yet thinks Desdemona honest. Turning to the other horn of the dilemma, we see—if he was an actual husband—that his conduct in so soon giving way to Iago's base characterization of Desdemona must be accepted as proving his knowledge of her nature to be such that he could neither protest against nor disbelieve a charge of conduct which he had to think both probable and characteristic. Repulsive as is a conclusion so ruinous to Desdemona and harmful to the Moor, there is no escape from it if the marriage was a consummated one. Rather than think Othello would stand mute when Desdemona was first maligned, or that his fading wrath was such as would be satisfied with a decidedly suspicious attempt to withdraw the slander on his wife and with no sort of real justice done her, we are compelled to believe with Booth that it is



the Moor's allegiance to truth which overpowers him; that Iago successfully appeals to his memories of the feminine will "most rank" and actions "bold." But we cannot shoot Niagara and stop halfway down: we have to conclude that the wife's vile nature is proved by her own husband, and the play must sink under the weight of gross naturalism, of an inglorious Moor, and a wretchedly bedraggled Desdemona.\* Booth simply carried the common theory to its inevitable conclusion.

Actors of Othello have sought by a stage maneuver to get away from the destructive scholastic theory of the temptation scene, and have been encouraged in so doing by critics who fail to see that a half-justification of the Moor or a half or wrongly directed anger in him at this point is inconsistent and altogether insufficient. With no word of protest at this flagging stage in Othello's lines, they have sought to help out the seeming dumbfounded, silent, consenting attitude of the Moor by causing him to turn with threatening expression and glare fiercely at Iago for a moment when he broached the suggestion of "thoughts unnatural"; although a little later succumbing altogether and showing plainly that the wrath was inspired by the ensign's impudence and not by a sense of justice prompting him to defend his wife's character. There is cer-

\* Hazlitt could think of Desdemona as excessive in bodily appetite, but delicate in mind—a fair and dainty miscegenationist! So, heroically, did he struggle to save Shakespeare.

tainly full warrant and necessity for some display of anger by Othello; but a passing ebullition against Iago, followed by a speedy collapse when the ensign apologizes, cannot suffice. It is out of harmony with the scene further on, and it leaves the devoted wife without a syllable of true, sympathetic defense just where the Moor should have voiced it most fervently. Later we might pardon him because the poison is working powerfully, but not yet. "Now, very now" should he speak. And yet we are asked to think him voiceless on behalf of Desdemona now, and indignant later on when time enough has passed for his mind to be infected and his confidence undermined. Never did Shakespeare so blunder.

Feeling instinctively that the noble Moor must show some sort of indignation at this early point,—at least that of facial expression,—the actors and critics have been shut off by Othello's ensuing silence and surrender from giving it proper expression and direction. Lacking the true key, this indeed cannot be done. The best possible for the Moor, in view of the way Iago quickly puts down his pegs of wrath, is to suppose that anger arose in his face at the presumption of the ensign in aspersing Desdemona, but before the feeling could find expression in act or voice it was foiled partly by the ancient's humble effort to recant, but more completely by an upward-surging, overwhelming consciousness in Othello's mind that the rank will and actions bold were truths and the accusation against his wife had a basis only too

credible and probable in the light of his own marital knowledge of her.

Although this is the best that has been done with this speech, we can never be satisfied with such degradation. The actors have been right in portraying rising anger on the face of Othello; they should see, however, that it was no mere puffed-up resentment of Iago's supposed impudence, but that the Moor was fired by a generous, righteous indignation, strong for the moment at least and born of his conviction that he personally knew Desdemona to be the reverse of what she was charged. Assigning the expression of anger on Othello's face this worthy and appropriate meaning, we need no longer fear being unable to give a consistent explanation of his silence during the remainder of Iago's speech, but may at last rise to an appreciation of that utterance as one so fearful in suggestive power and craft that it might well drive the mounting anger from the Moor's countenance and force him at the end to cower as he did, begging to be left alone in his misery. The true theory straightens out the difficulty of Othello's sudden collapse, and shows the tremendous change to be the result of the unsurpassable cunning of Iago. Here, indeed, is a most signal display of his power. Waking wrath came to the Moor at first when he thought how different the Desdemona he knew was from the one Iago pictured; but it quickly faded into agony and collapse when Iago brought her abstinent conduct in the marriage into line and harmony with her suggested vileness outside it—

explained it as at once a recoil to Cassio and to her "better judgment," a timely and "happy" repentance!

Iago does not, as has been thought, turn at once from poisonous insinuation against Desdemona to a flimsy, awkward, puerile pretense of having let the accusation pass his lips unguardedly, and then afterward vainly trying to recall it—a paltry device worthy of a beginner in duplicity, not such an expert as he. We are not required to think of Othello's rising anger as a mere arrogant, pride-inspired ebullition against the presumption of Iago which was allayed and satisfied by the ancient's transparent effort to recant. Nor did secret knowledge of Desdemona start up suddenly, ruining all faith in her. No; the anger which started in Othello's face was the manly indignation of the husband who felt that of his own knowledge he knew Desdemona to be the opposite of the calumny put upon her; but before this feeling could be expressed in act or voice the marvelous cunning of Iago turned it awry.

"But pardon me; I do not in position  
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms,  
And happily repent."

No anger after this rapier thrust; only choking appeals of "farewell, farewell," and "leave me, Iago." Only in the light of the arrested marriage can we see this wonderful stroke. Without that great truth we cannot get away from the common-



place, unworthy conceptions of this scene which have been so long prevalent.

Not showing any sustained anger, and surely not quieted by a transparent retraction utterly unworthy of Iago or the play, we must think, with respect for logical truth at least, that the Moor—if an actual husband—had his marital memories of Desdemona successfully invoked in proof of her villainess. The degradation of her character is thus attested by her own husband, and it is but faint consolation for us to know she is not guilty with Cassio. If she reveled in miscegenation for a time, we cannot, with Hazlitt, still think her delicate-minded, but woefully the reverse. Such is the painful and distressing outcome of the common theory—the only logical stopping-place—so long as we think that when Iago breathed forth icy-lipped slander and Othello listened at this turning-point both had in mind a consummated marriage. If so, the art of the scene and of the play is thrown into ruin.

On the other hand, when we understand that both speaker and listener were thinking of an unconsummated union, the doubling back or seeming contradiction in Iago's speech is a turn of surpassing adroitness. Iago foils the rising wrath of Othello by saying that any bridal arrest or recoil from him after marriage would indicate only that Desdemona turned back in time to a man of her own race, having failed to "match you with her country forms" and having "happily repented" of her first, unnatural choice; not that there was any abatement of her ungovernable appetite. Such is

the more than fiendish cunning with which Iago reaches into the holiest place in the soul of the Moor, catches him securely at the one difficult and dangerous point, holding to the slander of Desdemona's motive, and yet squaring it with Othello's knowledge of her contented abstinence, turning goodness into pitch even beyond the measure of his satanic hope.

Although the prime ground of the slander whispered in Othello's ear is that of Desdemona being a woman of unnatural passion, marrying as she did, Iago does not insinuate that in wedlock she has ever manifested desires or ardors questionable in the least. Othello would know that to be absolutely false, without a first shadow of truth; and with the underlying insinuation known to be untrue, the whole ground of calumny would be likely to fall away from his mind. Here, certainly, was most dangerous ground for Iago, unless he knew the whole truth and could play upon it consistently. Because of his dexterous villainy, and because he knew the truth of the marriage, Iago was equal to the emergency—capable of accusing Desdemona of unnatural desire, and yet compelling the base charge to fit in and square with the beautiful truth of her saved virginity in marriage; and he cunningly did this by seeming to conjecture that after the wedding she stopped short, not being equal, when the test came, to her proposed and planned outrage on nature. That fits in perfectly with her abstention in wedlock as known to Othello, and yet permits the charge of extreme

appetite to stand and to point toward Cassio. Thus does Iago adroitly avoid carrying his aspersion of Desdemona to the point of implying actual *marriage of marriage* miscegenation; and thus also does he disclose his conviction she is yet in her virginal state. This marvelous dramaturgic art is utterly lost in the prevailing interpretations of the play.\*

Just here we may pause to consider a parallel instance of modern miscorrection and misinterpretation in this play. Bowdler, with a taste for emendation almost equal to his insatiable one for expurgation, suggested that it would greatly improve the probability of the plot if Cassio instead of Iago had sailed on the vessel with Desdemona on the trip to Cyprus, as there would then be a supposable opportunity for the guilt imputed to the lieutenant, and the jealousy of the Moor would not seem so irrational—a suggestion esteemed by many writers as one of those which small minds can sometimes supply to amend the work of great. But surely it is quite different. Bowdler's idea of assigning the opportunities for guilt to the voyage would take away the intense and piteous tragic woe of Othello being compelled to see and think of them as existing only in the hours of his own holy and volun-

\* The doubling, serpentine conclusion of Iago's speech, after he has imputed unnatural passion to Desdemona, I would paraphrase thus: But I do not mean to take the position that she will distinctly and literally act out this spirit with you in the marriage; for I fear she may fall to comparing you with her countrymen, and, recoiling to her better judgment, happily repent. He slyly uses the future tense, knowing the Moor must revert to the past.

tary absence when he spent the night under the same roof with Desdemona, but away from her chamber. The double stroke of proving his absence, and of having him suspect Cassio's presence at the time and place suited only to the most poignant guilt, would be utterly lost. Blind to the nuptial by-plot, Bowdler offered a change which would pervert, not improve, Shakespeare's work. So with the long array of brilliant writers who, determined to find some worthy or at least artistic purpose in the play, and missing the true one of the marriage, have struggled so persistently to push the marriage out of sight and compel us to think of the Moor and Desdemona merely as subjects impaled for the fiendish sport and triumph of Iago. Striving, as they thought, to do justice to the intellectual power of Iago, even at the expense of Othello, they have really done a great wrong to the consistent power displayed in both. We must see the truth of the wedding plot, alike if we are to palliate Othello's surrender to doubt or to appreciate the skill of Iago in playing upon the fact of the arrested union and effecting that marvelously adroit turn when he had to face a desperate emergency on the spur of the moment, and instantly square his characterization of Desdemona with the contradictory truth known to Othello.

It is contrary to all previous criticism, but I insist that Roderigo was a dupe who taxed strongly Iago's skill and displayed it at its highest. From the first Iago anticipated little difficulty with



Othello; he had no thought of the emergency he did stumble upon, but believed the Moor could be led by the nose "as tenderly as asses are" and made "egregiously an ass." Just the contrary is the case with Roderigo. "If this trash of Venice will stand the putting on." He recognizes the possibility of failure with Roderigo; something he never does with Othello. Down to the last he fears Roderigo will force him to "restitution large." It is true he speaks of Roderigo as a fool and as a "snipe," indicating his contempt for one who surrendered to passion's sway, but he never thinks of working him so easily as the Moor. The truth is, even the character of Roderigo—entirely Shakespeare's own and with no suggestion from Cinthio—has been singularly misconceived in the eclipse of the hymeneal underplot. He was not a mere libidinous popinjay who could be duped without effort or by any tale, but was to be handled only by a master in the art of duplicity—one never so consummately cunning as when disguising art under an appearance of coarse bluntness and crudeness.

Roderigo was a man of wealth, holding the rank of a gentleman, and had been a suitor to Desdemona. He was repelled by Brabantio, but seemingly only on account of his looseness, and not strenuously on that ground; for after the elopement the old senator sincerely regrets that Roderigo had not won his daughter. Brabantio appeals to Roderigo to know whether, in his studies or reading, he had not heard of the arts inhibited, such as were

charged against Othello, implying that the question was to a man of education and some scholarly habits. Later the old magnifico thanks "good Roderigo"; promises to appreciate and deserve his help. Roderigo, moreover, displays signal courage, braving the valiant Cassio on two occasions in a manner worthy of a better purpose. Rich, educated, courageous, dubbed a gentleman when that title meant much, deferred to by the old senator, Roderigo is not, with all his vice and folly, to be set down as a contemptible cully, but is a figure far more worthy of Iago's art.

In Elizabethan dramatic literature the sensualist who was notably choice in taste sought the maiden prize, passing a wife or widow as, in the language of Fletcher's *Oriana*, a zone untied, a lily trod upon. Much more pungent phrases, expressive of this conceit, must occur to anyone familiar with that old literature. Since those expressions reflected the epicurean sensualism of the time in men of quality, a prejudiced, Moor-hating Elizabethan audience could think of Roderigo looking forward eagerly to win the discarded wife of a blackamoor only in case he was a wretch animated by peculiarly gross, repulsive passion and degraded far below his proper rank. Roderigo was no such man. He represents the aristocratic form of sensual vice; he sought *Desdemona* as a daintier prize than was to be found in all that display of carnal beauty which Venice offered to a man of his character and means.

Roderigo's mind was warped by passion, infected by the folly always accompanying illicit desires, and

yet he was not utterly blinded or as foul in taste as in morals. We have only to read carefully to see that his pursuit of Desdemona was animated by the hope of securing her while in a virginal state and in name only a wife to the Moor. Consider his expressions. He believed Desdemona to be living in "a most blessed condition," although married to a Moor, and could not credit anything which imputed either immodesty or indelicacy to her ("I cannot believe that in her"—"Why, 'tis not possible"—"That was but courtesy"), obviously expecting if he ever met success to attain it through her soft feminine weakness rather than any inclination to wrong. His expressions show he regarded Desdemona as a creature of singularly sweet and delicate life; came as near the reverential attitude of Cassio as such a man could; and was continually dropping away from any belief in the possibility of winning her even through her gentleness and simplicity, and having to be bolstered up anew by Iago from time to time.

Frequently in despair of winning Desdemona because her virtue seemed to him impregnable, on the occasion of the nuptial celebration Roderigo was ready to give up the chase for a different reason—because he thought the prize had lost or would soon lose its charm. He compared himself to the hound that followed behind, filling up the pack and coming too late, while another at the front would gain the prey. Iago also tells us Roderigo was a hound of "quick hunting." He could not be satisfied with a prospect of being second or arriving

after the game was caught. Just what Roderigo knew about the nuptial celebration is uncertain—probably not much more than Iago told him, for he was not one of the revelers, but was skulking on the edge of the scene in disguise. He was present, however, at the joyous, loving reunion of Othello and Desdemona at Cyprus, and a man of his character must have had strong doubts whether the platonic marriage could continue much longer under the new circumstances. As his money was going and difficulties increased, and Desdemona seemed to be passing on toward a consummated union with Othello, Roderigo began to flag. Day is breaking after the night of the jubilee and the nuptial celebration when the discouraged Roderigo appears, lamenting all opportunity or temptation as about gone or soon to be gone forever for him, and declares he will be likely soon to return to Venice with a little more wit and experience and no money at all.

It is curious what a different method Iago employs for this emergency with Roderigo than for the previous one. As Roderigo now calls a halt for a new reason, Iago has to start him with a new suggestion, but he is as indirect and circuitous as ever in offering it. He prates of patience, congratulates Roderigo on making good progress, especially in displanting Cassio, reproaches him for not allowing reasonable time, and declares the conquest of Desdemona is proceeding as rapidly and encouragingly as anyone could ask in reason. And yet, after dwelling profusely on the encouraging prospect of



winning Desdemona and giving all the reasons he can in support of it, he touches the other phase of the matter—whether Desdemona will long remain worth winning—as one not to be discussed then, but intimates that Roderigo shall “know more” on some future occasion. So darkly, vaguely, yet skillfully, does he touch the one possible question with Roderigo. How often in life we hear many words on inconsequential matters with a bare reference to that about which we hunger and thirst, and yet how seldom is the trick played as Iago plays it here! Voluble about what no longer concerns the halting dupe, Iago waxes profuse over the irrelevant, while the real cause of the collapse of the “gull’d gentleman” he touches as a mere after-thought, and yet with a quick, sharp, arousing suggestion of new and encouraging developments which he has not then time to relate in detail (“Thou shalt know more hereafter”), but which the rogue would have understood as disclosures of the nuptial night just passed, showing the prize yet untouched by the Moor and so to remain permanently, thus sounding, but not satisfying, the precise source of Roderigo’s despair.

“Does ’t not go well?”

Surely so. How, indeed, if fully informed, could Roderigo ask a finer prospect either as to winning Desdemona or having her prove still worth winning! Aiming to arouse, not satisfy, Iago does not proceed to give the really desired information, but suddenly finds time pressing (“By the mass,

'tis morning"), and replies to the aroused, questioning attitude and expressions of the dupe only by hurrying him off with "Away, I say" and "Nay, get thee gone." The appointed meeting, when Roderigo was to "know more," does not take place on the stage; but we have ample implication of what was told the dupe when waiting had sufficiently whetted his appetite. No doubt he soon heard all the enticing circumstances that Iago could relate of his own observation, and all he had learned through Emilia; and yet the better judgment of Roderigo was so strong and self-assertive that at his next appearance "this trash of Venice" is again in revolt, believing Desdemona, if as desirable as ever, nevertheless beyond approach.

It will be asked how so comparatively elevated a view of Roderigo as this can be reconciled with the grossness of the temptation Iago spread before him at first. At the outset Iago spoke of corrupting Desdemona <sup>brought to completion</sup> only after her marriage with Othello was consummated, and indeed when she was "sated with his body" and had learned to "heave the gorge" and "disrelish and abhor the Moor"—a picture the opposite of that presented later. But in this suggestion of a refined, alluring prospect at one time with a nauseous one at another we should see the consummate art of the knave. For Iago was as variable and serpentine with Roderigo as with Othello. Aiming to gull Roderigo by means of a self-wrought, ingrowing temptation rather than one plainly foisted on him from the outside, Iago, at the beginning, held one

prospect to the dupe's ear, well knowing another and more enticing one would be grasped by his hope. But beyond this, Iago's art is duplex, crescent: his allurements grow and become strongest and finest at the critical time. At the beginning the artful knave could use the coarsest and apparently most inconsiderate suggestion, knowing Roderigo was then ardent, fresh in the chase, and sure to look beneath rough words to perceive a thoroughly fine and tempting prospect for himself; but after the dupe had encountered the disappointment of the voyage and the more ominous one of the reunion of Othello and Desdemona on landing at Cyprus, Iago had to play the strength reserved for such an emergency. The need is different. From the first Iago knew he would have a disappointed man on his hands when he reached Cyprus, and that time has come. Words must fortify suggestions now. Iago now needs a footing in the mind of his dupe such as he could not possibly command if he had previously shown himself too subtle in allurements or too glowing in promises. He has now to present the temptation as still existing, still fit and alluring, and all the brighter and more feasible because seen by a man who had stupidly failed to see the attractive opportunity of the voyage. That is past and gone: the disappointment growing out of it is Roderigo's own, not Iago's.

Iago's failure to perceive and dilate on any opportunity of the voyage had fixed him in Roderigo's mind as a dull-sighted rogue, not one fertile in allurements. His credit with Roderigo is

the stronger now, when he needs such strength. It would never have done with a doubter like Roderigo to have had repeated disappointments following fast on rose-colored promises and predictions. Undercoloring instead at first, Iago kept his credit good with Roderigo and had reserve strength for the crisis—a fresh rallying inducement for the trying time of the nuptial celebration. But that this subtle villain really thought at any time that the prospect of succeeding a blackamoor husband in the favors of his discarded white wife was a fit one to tempt Roderigo, cannot be believed. To represent a man of Roderigo's social standing and familiarity with the higher forms of vice in a wealthy society as spurred to desperate effort by the hope of taking Desdemona from the arms of a sated blackamoor is a crudity too gross for Shakespeare. While the language of Iago at one time presents that prospect in terms, we must remember his character—that, as Roderigo once suspected for a moment, his words and his performances are no kin together. There is ample reason why we should scan Iago's speech for some other meaning than the surface one and analyze his cunning until we see not merely the crude, open suggestion used at first, but the real morsel he intended the dupe to roll under his tongue.

While, in his contemptuous pride of intellect, Iago speaks of Roderigo as a "snipe," he betrays latent fear of him down to the last, and strives to enlist his mind and supply him with food for mental



action as well as to excite his passions. Varying his methods with Roderigo from time to time, and adjusting them to circumstances, Iago undercolors on one occasion, depending on the dupe to strengthen the picture out of his own imagination, while at another he exaggerates, confident that the "gull'd gentleman" will then cut down and modify. But ever and always he deals with Roderigo as one who is naturally full of suspicion and a dangerous tool. Knowing Roderigo to be a questioner, Iago sees to it that he has something to question. From the first words of the play, "Tush, never tell me," to "I cannot believe that" and "'Tis not possible," and on down to the last act, where the slain Roderigo is found with a "discontented paper" of protest in his pocket, the "gull'd gentleman" sits in judgment, as he thinks, on the ensign, questioning and sifting his representations, throwing away a part, and yet finally absorbing just what was designed for him. "'Sblood but you will not hear me" is Iago's first artful expostulation, and he has to repeat it often in substance. Roderigo is tricked into a belief of passing judgment on Iago's blunt excesses of opinion and speech. Thus, he disputes his idea of love as a scion of base desire, rejects his characterization of Desdemona as basely overdrawn, and indeed does not in more than a single instance accept one of Iago's statements in its entirety.

As it was a part of the mental habit of Roderigo, in which he had been humored by Iago, to correct the ancient's coarse excesses of thought with his

supposed finer perception, he did this in reforming and bettering the temptation, just as he had done it before in reforming and bettering the picture of Desdemona's character. Just as he cut down and moderated Iago's gross picture of Desdemona's motives, so does he reduce the even grosser prophecy of her experiences with Othello; for if Iago, in foul excess, spoke only of winning her after she was sated in body of the Moor, Roderigo, in his somewhat better thought, must surely have said to himself, Long, long before.

Iago fixed Roderigo's prescription according to the precise constitution, habit, and assimilative power of the patient. Knowing Roderigo's disposition, Iago gave him not pure albumen, but the bulk and waste matter needed to aid his mental digestion; held before him the coarse prospect of succeeding Othello, well knowing the salacious imagination would be thereby stimulated into rearranging the materials and forming a more enticing and more cherishable temptation for itself. If we have put before us an allurement as possible next week or next month, shall we not be eager to improve on such slow, belated suggestion and perceive the delight quicker and nearer at hand—as something to be seized at once? Or if some coarse wretch picture it to us in the debasing colors of his own mind, shall not our finer perception be aroused to grasp it in the more appropriate and alluring form suited to us? And if we thus catch at insidious suggestions, advanced as such and for the very purpose that we may throw away a part

and remold the rest in the warmth of our own minds, can we ever be duped so completely as in the hour when we suspect it least?

Iago's first emergency with Roderigo was at the close of the trial scene, when Othello passed off flushed with triumph, leaving the Venetian sensualist and his secret hopes utterly cast down. To revive a belief in the possibility of winning Desdemona was then Iago's supreme need, not, as later, to show she was yet worth winning. Roderigo had listened to the lofty pledge of the Moor which had so swept the Senate; he had heard the arrangements for the voyage in separate ships. Whether he believed the platonic marriage could or would endure permanently, we need not stop to ask, since Roderigo knew the union must of necessity remain unconsummated until after the ocean voyage. To a Venetian shipboard was a place for love fair or foul. Invited on the vessel with the young maiden wife; to have the insidious aid of her chosen protector and with the nominal husband far distant on another ship—what a prospect for the Venetian *roué*! This, however, was one of the pictures which a man of Iago's craft would never color truly, but would leave largely to the imagination and assumed better judgment of his dupe, who, chuckling to himself, might mutter "Ha, 'tis better than you think." Listening to Iago's scortatory suggestions of winning Desdemona from the Moor months hence at Cyprus, after the platonic union should have come to ruin and the blackamoor be wearied of the miscegenation, Roderigo's brain

could not fail to flash with the quick hope of an earlier and better opportunity during the voyage, or soon after reaching the island and while the marriage was yet unconsummated. But Roderigo had to conceive that: Iago would not whisper it.

There was a deep reason why Iago wanted appearances to picture him to Roderigo as coarse and crude—dull of sight and slow to see fine allurements. Roderigo was, unlike Othello, suspicious, not trusting. He was to some extent on the inside; knew Iago as a confessed villain, and yet was finally the worst dupe of all, being hoodwinked into thinking the ancient a blunt, coarse scoundrel, and dealing with him as such, when he was really the subtlest of knaves. Iago told him better—and then acted in a way to contradict his words. “Seeming so for my peculiar end.” “I am not what I am.” Suspecting at times that he was being daffed with some new device, and that the ancient’s words and intents were no kin, Roderigo yet thought Iago’s boasts of subtlety—of never permitting outward action to demonstrate the native act and figure of the heart—only coarse egotism.

Would a really crafty and subtle tempter have passed over the opportunity of the voyage to suggest the later and viler one—“leave that last which concerns him first”? Seeming not to see the opportunity of the voyage, even when working the dupe with it most effectually, Iago created upon Roderigo just the impression he desired—that of being a fellow of some craft, but a boaster; a rough worker, sure to miss fine opportunities and effects;



and valuable as an ally only because of his close and confidential position with Desdemona.

Roderigo was a man to be gulled by the fine temptation which Iago caused him to spin for himself, not by the coarse one of the ancient's open speech. Shakespeare dearly loved lords and gentlemen; and we may be sure he would not allow a man of Roderigo's rank to be overcome by utterly base and scurvy temptation. Roderigo's designs against Desdemona properly demeaned him below his true position; caused him to sell his land and waste his means; degraded his mind, character, and conduct; and subjected him even to the insolence of Iago; but we cannot think Shakespeare would go beyond these dramatic necessities or proprieties and reduce him to the level of a contemptible popinjay. That would be against Shakespeare's set prejudices, against the dramatic needs, and must greatly impair the displayed art of Iago. For a "gentleman" to be "gull'd" was something unusual, extraordinary; a rare stroke of villainy which only a surpassingly cunning rogue could accomplish; and even in the hour when such a man was an unconscious victim, he ought to preserve some of the superiority which belonged to his rank and feel some contempt and distaste for the coarse Iagoish suggestions put before him. That was just what Roderigo did, or thought he did; and yet at that very moment of pride and assumed superiority he was Iago's most signal dupe.

Arm in arm with Roderigo, and keeping step

with him through all his turns, qualms, and revolts; winding the boa-folds ever tighter—confessing himself a profound villain when he knew Roderigo would never take a boaster's word as an index to really super-subtle guile; using the art which most thoroughly conceals art, even when suggesting the capture of the discarded wife under circumstances which must compel the victim to think only of the virgin bride instead, Iago's methods are those of an astute and transcendent intellectual villainy capable of ensnaring soul and body at once, and yet never to be appreciated until the truth of the wedding plot and the arrested marriage is first fully perceived.

Meeting other difficulties, the unconsummated marriage does not fail to throw light on the great and otherwise hopelessly dark one of no credible cause for Iago's malice toward Othello—his " motiveless malignity," as Coleridge terms it. During the first two acts Iago's desire for revenge on Othello remained without any distinct plan—as vague or lacking in method as it was in any fit cause; his villainous purpose was not concentrated or crystallized into a concrete form until the truth of the marriage was unfolded before his eyes, and he saw superadded to the opportunity for vengeance on Othello the even choicer one of wrecking a relation of surpassing beauty merely for the pleasure of destroying it. Iago had an abnormal, almost maniacal, desire to wreck virtuous people; the better they were the more eager he was to destroy them. Goodness was the red flag to him,

and this marriage of super-elevation, when once he perceived its true nature, stimulated and quickened his destructive spirit as the sight of prey whets the appetite of a carnivorous animal. Moreover, the peculiar marriage, while it heightened his desire to wreck Othello, also suggested to him a peculiarly tempting, effective, cruel way to accomplish it.

For quite a time indeed after he formed his general idea of throwing Othello into a jealousy, Iago's plan had remained half formed, nebulous. "'Tis here, but yet confused" is the way he describes it even so late as in the second act, just before the nuptial celebration. It was that event which precipitated his plans and purposes into a final form for action. It was only when the truth of the marriage appeared that Iago completed his plan, and he did it then quickly. Taking the vilest view of the union at first, Iago had admitted to himself, after Othello's renunciation before the Senate, that the Moor would likely prove "a most dear husband," but it took the disclosures of the nuptial night to convince him fully. He was not present when the Moor parted from his bride at the threshold of the nuptial chamber, but he took part in the night brawl and noticed how it summoned Othello and Desdemona at different times and from different apartments, and in addition he knew of Emilia's nightly attendance on Desdemona. He could doubt no longer, and, seeing a relation of extraordinary beauty, he was seized with the ambition of destroying it and the parties to it at one fell blow,

the twofold scheme of villainy coming at once to a head.

Convinced by the nuptial celebration, Iago has thereafter nothing more to say of the night being made wanton with Desdemona, but significantly declares Othello has given himself up to "the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces"—conduct most platonic and striking in contrast with what Iago had previously expected and predicted. More significant still is his picture of Desdemona's state. "Her appetite shall play the god with his weak function." To deflect or turn such goodness is a prospect for imps of darkness; and, when he once sees it, Iago eagerly completes his plot and pants for immediate action. He has every inducement, every opportunity, now. He will "turn her virtue into pitch" and "out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all." He will "undo her credit with the Moor"—a credit which is not simply that of a loyal wife such as may be found every day and on every hand, but the peculiarly rare and tempting one of a creature angelical in super-elevation and against whom devils like Iago are always inspired to strike hardest and quickest.

Moved to destroy the marriage simply because of its surpassing innocence and beauty, Iago exhibits the spirit of a Mephistopheles, and yet is caused to appear to us a man rather than pure devil. We are hardly willing to think palliation or extenuation possible in his case, and yet he interests us as a fellow-creature. There is a touch of



humanity and human interest, even the fellow-feeling, concerning him. It will be found, I think, on full consideration that the Shakespearean method of arousing fellow-feeling just where we think it most impossible (so powerfully invoked in this play as to transform in thought a prospective miscegenation) overlaps from the characters of Othello and Desdemona and extends to Iago with strength sufficient to save him from the sheer horror and repulsion of diabolism and effectively touch a chord of human interest. The truth is, we feel ourselves to be in the position Iago falsely claimed for himself: "I lack iniquity to do me service." We think it is conscience which keeps us from being as successful, rich, dominant, or famous as we might be if our scruples were not so great; hence a feeling of interest and fascination in a man who has cast all that aside and lets nothing interfere with his purposes, but strikes as wantonly as unchecked greed or ambition can dictate. So is this fiend actually kept in touch with humanity and caused to affect us with a fellow-feeling. We could never be wanton as he, yet must furtively, half consciously, think of being somewhat like him—some degrees more forceful and unscrupulous than we are. Ah, what success then! If we had less conscience and fewer scruples—if we could strike or scheme with something of Iago's relentless power and determination—how rich we might be, how successful, where now we fail! Iago touches a fellow-chord, not of pity or of sympathy, but of a distant, dreamy, smoldering half-envy.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE FINAL LESSON.

NOT undervaluing Shakespeare as a poet and dramatist, we have come in later days to prize him most as an interpreter of human life. It has been said to be inconceivable that his influence as such should ever decline, so strongly and truly does he speak to humanity of its mysteries and perplexities. What, then, is his final message to us in the "Othello"?

After we have solved the long-standing enigma of a supposed base amalgamation and seen how the device of the arrested marriage illumined the union of Othello and Desdemona with beauty, we can advance to the final difficulty of characters so worthy and ennobled being brought to a dreadful fate.

We are not to look for some implied triumph of abstract good over evil. Shakespeare was never truer to dramatic art, never more direct or vivid, than in the catastrophe of this play. After the marriage is invested with wondrous mitigation and caused to sound every required note of dramatic art in moving the heart, it still stands out pathetically but inexorably as one from which no good could come. Arrested or deflected, it called for the impossible; it could not long survive. Kept pla-

tonic, it was still in appearance and suggestion an anomaly, a seeming wrong, an offense to family life. The sober, sane, éminently Shakespearean test of fitness for the natural end and function of marriage is the one that inevitably condemns the union of Othello and Desdemona and compels us to see it as one that could lead only to disaster. Iago, with all his machinations, was only the malign agency brought into play when Nemesis was due.

It abates nothing finally that the marriage was really free of natural offense. That mitigates and extenuates it touchingly to our sympathies, elevates the plot to the region of refined literary art; but there remains, even after we have given in to the enforced sympathy, the Shakespearean lesson of condemnation for that which offends hopelessly against marriage in appearance, and in the eyes of the world. Here is the general ethical lesson vitally incorporate with the dramatic one. With Shakespeare wedlock must be above suspicion. Society must punish even the appearance of dishonor to the fountain of family life. Even as our tears flow, we must admit at last that only inexorable justice was visited on Othello and Desdemona. Beautiful in sentiment, their marriage was an offense against society and a seeming blot on family life and propriety. The one thing Shakespeare could not permit it to have was continuous and prosperous existence. He alone could bring a black-white marriage up to the elevation of the beautiful and the pathetic; not even he could give

it permanent and prosperous life. We cannot, even at command of the loftiest sentiment, depart too far from the safe ways of nature and of the society to which we belong—not even in appearance. More profoundly than he knew did Othello speak a truth:

“ They that mean virtuously and yet do so,  
The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.”

So was his manly trust in Desdemona tempted, shaken, and betrayed through his own error. The general ethical lesson is not abstract nor in any way opposed to the dramatic one, but part and parcel of it; and it is just here that the art of the play surpasses all that modern readers have known. It is the long-unseen but wonderful device of the arrested marriage which pervades the whole play (even the villainy of Iago and the credulity of Roderigo being adjusted to it) and displays throughout the underplot the cunning art of Shakespeare; supplying the mitigation as it transforms the dramatically and alarmingly proposed miscegenation until it becomes a thing of hope; displaying heavenly beauty where we had looked expecting to see only vile repulsion; sweeping us on past the successive stages of surprise, contrast, and sympathetic emotional revolution up to the very ecstasy of woe, and then leaving us face to face with the stern logical justification of the Moor and his bride come to ruin as the inevitable consequence of a union essentially wrong however extenuated by pathos and beauty. But without the light of the platonic marriage the world has been able to see



for centuries only a base, revolting amalgamation, with no play of extenuating art and a catastrophe appropriate only to animal jealousy and miscegenation or to be dismissed as an enigma. Far from these mistaken views, it is instead the world's highest example of perfected dramatic art, embodying in one display the concentrated power and beauty of alarm, contrast, thrilling redemption, and yet at last the inexorable ruin of the tragic fault.

What if Shakespeare had lived, say, two centuries earlier, had been devoted to the Church, and this wonderful dramatic genius of his had been called to the writing of a miracle play? Would he then have attempted another step? If so, what might we have in literature to-day? Would he have sought by human means to denote the divinely-arrested marriage and consecration to which his art points as the culmination of a truth passing beyond the touch of man? Or would he have declined the task—turned away like the character in Greek tragedy who, when smitten with an emotion too great for language, spoke not a word, but hid his face from sight?

If the peculiar and reverent delicacy of Shakespeare in picturing Desdemona's state in marriage, and the strong demonstration of an arrested union as beyond the pale of unaided human effort or content, do not reflect the belief of the poet in respect to the marriage of Joseph and Mary and the Incarnation, we have at least other light of inestimable value in the new interpretation. We do not now lack an answer to the long-standing com-

plaint against Shakespeare of indifference to the claims of human nature itself, of surrender to race prejudice, and of saving all the good of life for the favorites of rank and fortune. With Othello in the true light, we see that Shakespeare has caused a man of lowly race, one who had been a slave, to rise by his own efforts to a post of command over white nobles, and to be vested with such qualities of nobility and supersensuous will as the poet conferred on no hero of his own race. In the exaltation of "the black Othello" in worldly success and in actual character, as now perceived, we have a Shakespearean protest against race prejudice and an expression of belief in the self-made man—a sweeping refutation of an accusation against the poet which has long stood without reply. If the new interpretation give no fresh illustration of Shakespeare's art, it will at least prove him not out of sympathy with the popular movement of later ages, but one who painted gloriously the royalty and nobility of manhood itself in presenting his noblest, most spiritual-minded hero as one with a black skin.

Does Shakespeare not intend us to look beyond the earthly fate of Othello and Desdemona? To the world they seemed to offend against a necessary law of earthly marriage which guards the physical integrity of races; and, so at fault, they were exposed to the punishment society must inflict in self-defense even though the guilt was that of appearance, not reality. If the marriage had been real and no Iago had appeared, the utilitarian laws

of society would have cut the pair and their descendants off from the honored surroundings of home and family so indispensably needful to the happiness or content of such characters. Victims of this world,\* the two pass over the border of another with faith and love resplendent. Does not this reluming of love and faith as this world faded in darkness point to another where a better justice is to be done?

As usual with Shakespeare, the characters stand for types; and the general lesson centers about what Wendell calls "the vast evil mystery of sex." Roderigo is a complete victim. Cassio, beset both by love of wine and women, has yet some high inspirations and tendencies toward better living. Iago and Emilia show a legal marriage, but one not elevated by true love; only sensuous in its relations. Othello and Desdemona stand for the supremely countervailing powers which religion brings to bear in the struggle against sensuous besetment. The Moor grandly rises above the pleasures of appetite, renouncing them absolutely; he displays the ideal of the celibate devotee when, thinking of Desdemona's supposed favor to Cassio, he declares he

\* Dowden, consenting by silence to the theory which takes the marriage of the pair as actual, yet thinks they present a consoling triumph of goodness, regarded from the standpoint of this world alone. Never could Shakespeare so glorify an amalgamation. Even when kept sacredly platonic, the marriage is still so opposed to the decorum of refined society and family life that it could never command honor and success in this world.

had "not wanted what was stolen." Desdemona is truer to the heart and to nature, in aiming to sanctify the physical and lose it in the mental. The purity and refinement of Desdemona are the more striking since she was not to overcome the sensuous by denying, or discarding, but by transforming it through love, self-sacrifice, and devotion—

" . . . heaven me such uses send  
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend !"

That is the truest spirit, but even it is capable of misuse, for Desdemona herself carried the exaltation of the mental over the physical to an extent not to be endured when she married with Othello. The best of humanity struggles toward her level, but happily will always fall short. To and from the ideal of Desdemona there are ebbs and tides in philosophy and religion, one generation tending toward supersensuous idealism, another falling to platonic affectation, and yet another striking somewhere near the happy mean.

THE END.





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